We Stan Scrap Gege!

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We Stan Scrap Gege!

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Summary

> “San Lang…are you sure about this? Life on the road, storage units…it’s not glamorous. There’s junk and there’s gross fluids and roaches and raccoons and meth labs, and one time I got lead poisoning and- oh! Another time I accidentally got locked inside a unit with five families and loaded on a truck and then I think *technically* we were human trafficked-?”
>
> “Gege. I’m in this, all the way.”

Scrap Collector’s cancellation is inevitable.

Once, Xie Lian was the most popular face in reality TV. After the...*incident*, Xie Lian is banished to 2am cable, and turns to making a different kind of show: storage hunting.

But in his final season, he suddenly acquires a new producer: a Youtube star named San Lang. And San Lang- along with his legion of fans- is determined to save the show.
📺🎥💕

The Scrap Collector

Chapter Notes

Please note this fic contains canon references which are spoilers for the TGCF novel!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Xie Lian was usually in trouble in these sorts of meetings.

Today was no exception.

"Oh well, Jun Wu sir, I…typically put the camera on the stand, and then I kind of duct tape the boom mic to the ceiling of whatever storage unit I'm in at the time-"

"I am aware, Xie Lian, but given most of the fan engagement for *Scrap Collector* appears to be compilations of the boom falling off and landing on you, that is not quite the engagement we're aiming to see."

"There are fans of my show!?"

"Well…there have been two Youtube compilations from your show in the last year. Both of them are just…that."

"Two!? That's amazing, I'd love to see them!"

Jun Wu was massaging his forehead in that way that indicated Xie Lian was perhaps not grasping his point. He tried again.

"Okay, would you prefer I work without a boom? I could use a tie-clip microphone but I find I break them easily, it gets dusty in those units and you never know what kind of fluid might get on you out of nowhere-"

"Xianle."

Xie Lian hesitated. He did not love it when Jun Wu referred to his home city; it brought back only bad memories.

Nonetheless, Jun Wu was the CEO of Heavenly Capital Studios, and *Scrap Collector* was the show with the lowest numbers, so he could say whatever he wanted.

Lowest numbers by a *colossal* amount. Xie Lian was once excited to see a spike in viewership stats to three digits, until he found out that a local aged care facility had left his

channel playing 24/7 that month by accident. The residents complained.

Everyone knew the only reason he was still on the air was the airtight contract he had signed nine years ago, back when Heavenly Capital Studios was still fledgling but Xie Lian was immensely popular. It promised him ten seasons, or a sizeable severance payout.

Flower Crowned Prince was a once in a generation hit with 80 million viewers per episode, so ten seasons was supposed to be a safe bet. And there was no shortage of content for the premise: 'common people' sending 'prayers' to Xie Lian to help them with the problems in their lives.

Then…the incident. A quite catastrophic and embarrassingly public fall from grace.

Xie Lian was given the choice: go quietly with the severance money, or be banished to the most obscure cable access channel that the network had actually forgotten they owned. He would be on the air, but he'd have no budget, staff or assistance.

The show wouldn't appear on the studio's streaming platform or Youtube channel either. *Scheduled* television only; truly the most cruel curse. The intellectual property rights for the original show were also off the table, so Xie Lian would have to do something completely different and very, very cheap.

The offer was clearly as close to a joke as the studio could legally get.

At the time, everyone involved with *Flower Crowned Prince* knew there was only one possible course of action: for Xie Lian to take the money, and leave with whatever tattered shreds of dignity he still had.

Xie Lian had never had much use for dignity.

"Xianle, I must ask…you know this is your last year, yes?"

Xie Lian didn't let his smile falter. "I know! The ninth season of *Scrap Collector*! I'm really honoured to have had the opportunity for so long." He didn't elaborate on the missing year, they all knew what it was. Nine Seasons of *Scrap Collector,* and only one of *Flower Crowned Prince*.

Ling Wen, Head of Legal, cleared her throat awkwardly. They all knew it was not an 'opportunity' he'd been given out of generosity or merit; it was merely an embarrassing legal snafu created by her predecessors.

"Yes. Well…we just wanted to reiterate that we will not be ordering more episodes of *Scrap Collector.* "

"I know! That's fine. Thank you again, it's been incredible! I can't wait to give the show a proper sendoff, maybe a compilation episode of all the wonderful moments I've had."

"What moments would those be? Didn't you almost get rabies last season?" said Ling Wen carefully.

“That poor raccoon,” agreed Xie Lian sadly.

“You haven’t sent any files yet? Is that right? You know your first episode is due next week.”

“Oh, I always just send the episode file to Scheduling on the day. I don’t have enough room on my USB for a whole season, and internet cafes are always pretty slow to transfer!”

Ling Wen’s expression flattened even further.

“Anyway,” smiled Jun Wu thinly. “The paperwork is all in order. We just need your signature,” He gestured to the contract in front of him.

Xie Lian peered at it. “Is it alright if I take it away and review it?”

Jun Wu seemed to stifle a sigh. Xie Lian knew they were asking for his signature purely out of kindness; once this season ended they would be well within their rights to simply terminate all contact with him. Still, his father had always said to never sign contracts on the same day.

“That’s fine,” said Ling Wen briskly. “It’s just a formality, indicating that your show will be cancelled, all episodes removed from our back catalogue, and all physical tapes destroyed by fire.”

“That seems a little harsh, but alright,” said Xie Lian weakly.

Jun Wu drummed his fingers on his wide black desk in the manner of a meeting adjourned. “Well. Xianle. Do take your time reading through the fine print. But I don’t see any reason we can’t put out the announcement, it’s just a media formality for our fall lineup. We’ll send you the statement; we don’t need any feedback. It’ll go out today.”

“Very well,” nodded Xie Lian. “Thank you for your time, sir. I know you have much more important places to be.”

“Mmm. All the best, Xianle.”

Jun Wu rose, and swept from the room. Xie Lian stood and stretched, placing the contract carefully in his old worn backpack.

“I appreciate your work, Ling Wen.”

“Get that back to me when you can. And you’ll be emailed when the announcement goes out.”

“Ah, right,” he winced.

Xie Lian couldn’t afford a smartphone, and he wasn’t very good with technology, even though he was only twenty nine. He never checked his emails; there was no point anyway since no one ever sent him any.

He did all his business with the studio by phone, and in fairness, that 'business' for the last several years had exclusively involved one annual phone call with Ling Wen, begrudgingly confirming the new season.

He'd not been back to the Capital (as it was known) that entire time; he was always on the road anyway. He left Jun Wu's office, and wandered through the bright, airy halls of the Capital, now a ten storey building. It had certainly expanded since the days of *Flower Crowned Prince.*

There were entire wings devoted to different shows, with office administrators, social media publicists, software engineers, advertising liaisons, and casting agents all busily going about their days. And of course, hundreds more staff out on location actually filming the shows.

Everyone scurried past him, absorbed in their tasks. None of them had any idea who he was. After all, ten years was basically eight hundred in the television world. That suited Xie Lian fine; his show costume had thankfully involved a golden mask, so hardly anyone recognised him anymore.

The walls were covered in huge, glossy season posters for their shows. The Capital specialised in reality TV.

They had three big-name shows. *Pei Ming: God of Love* was a dating show, *Martial Palace* was a one-on-one fight show, and *Wind Master* was a travel show.

Wind Master ate up a huge proportion of the budget every year with outlandish episodes devoted to all of the ways one could see the world by air: hot air balloons, vintage planes, paragliding, even a whole season where the host Shi Qingxuan travelled exclusively by blimp.

But Shi Qingxuan was so charming and popular with advertisers that it earned its money easily. Anywhere one looked around the country, one would see products with Shi Qingxuan's face on it. It also didn't hurt that their brother Shi Wudu was the CFO for the studio, as well as a close friend of Jun Wu.

A smattering of other small but steady shows completed their roster: *Rain and Ox,* a homesteading and gentle farming show hosted by the soothing Yushi Huang, *Battles of Old*, a historical battle reenactment show hosted by the pompous but endearing Lang Qianqiu, and *Fight Me or I'll Beat You Up,* a boxing gym show hosted by Quan Yizhen, former winner of *Martial Palace.*

All of their faces were on the walls as he ambled past. It went without saying that there was no trace of *Scrap Collector* to be seen.

Unfortunately, he bumped right into someone who *did* know exactly who he was.

"Ah! Mu Qing!"

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“What are you doing here,” said Mu Qing slowly, standing stiffly in the hallway with his bluetooth earpiece, giant thermos and baseball cap; the universal uniform of a busy producer.

He looked well. Stressed, and angry, but that was just his face. And older, of course, they’d been practically kids when they’d seen each other last. Xie Lian still marvelled sometimes that he was given a show when he was only 19.

“Ah, you know. Dotting the i’s, crossing the t’s,” grimaced Xie Lian.

“Oh,” he replied awkwardly. “Your show…has it really been-”

“Ten years? I know, I couldn’t believe it either.”

“Mu *QING!* WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU CALL THIS- Oh,” stopped Feng Xin awkwardly, mid stomp down the hallway. He had been angrily brandishing a piece of paper which now hung limply at his side. No one even spared them a glance. Apparently the office staff were used to that kind of language.

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He should have prepared himself for the possibility of seeing these two.

“It’s good to see you both!” he said earnestly. “I’m glad for you that *Martial Palace* is doing well.”

They shared a guilty look.

“Yes. Uh…long time,” said Feng Xin, shifting on his feet. His normal scowl had disappeared, replaced by something cautious and wary.

Xie Lian nodded. Everyone was silent.

“Well, I’d best be off! Need to start filming, episode plans, you know how it is!”

“Yeah,” grunted Feng Xin. “Is this, um-”

“The last season? Yes. I’ll be sorry to see it go, but all banquets come to an end.”

Mu Qing was staring at the ground, a little frown between his eyes.

“Right. Yeah. Well.”

They all stood stiffly. Xie Lian made the move first, readjusting his backpack straps. “Well. Bye, you two! Good luck this year.”

He walked away. Their eyes followed him all the way out the door.

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Xie Lian went to an internet cafe, and prayed as he typed that he remembered his password. The alternative was another grumpy encounter with the IT guy, He Xuan. Thankfully, it

worked. He saw the single email he'd been sent in the entire last year, which was a link from Ling Wen to the media statement now live on their website, confirming his cancellation.

He noted they'd filed it after five pm, to make sure it was as uninteresting to journalists as possible. Not that it wasn't already uninteresting.

Xie Lian was reading over the rest of the paperwork when he spotted it.

He wasn't sure why he called; everything was already in motion. But still.

She answered, sounding impatient. "Legal, Heavenly Capital Studios."

"Oh, hi! Ling Wen? It's me, um, Xie Lian? From before? *Scrap Collec* -?"

"I know who you are, Xie Lian."

"Right! Excellent, just making sure, um…I just noticed something about the contract-"

"Yes?"

"It says here if I get eighty million viewers that I can keep going? Is that right?"

Ling Wen coughed politely. "Ah, yes. That's really just a boilerplate that goes into most of our pre-cancellation paperwork, based on the recipient's previous average. In your case…"

Xie Lian hummed, unfazed. He wouldn't be getting eighty million views. "I know. I was just surprised it's in there. It's very nice of you to allow me some wiggle room!"

Ling Wen paused. "Yes," she said faintly.

"Well, anyway, thank you for taking my call."

"That is alright. You are still an employee. You may call anytime."

"Right! Yes, of course."

Xie Lian hung up and stared at the papers for a while.

Once, eighty million views was just another Tuesday. Now, reaching even a thousand views was obviously impossible. This was his last season.

But strangely, his heart felt soothed seeing the number there in black and white. He wasn't yet ready to say goodbye to *Scrap Collector,* but knowing it would be cancelled on the same terms as any other show was comforting. He would try his best until the end.

He shuffled the papers, and put them back into his backpack. He would sign and courier them in the morning, then get out of this city as quickly as he could. He disliked it here immensely.

In the meantime, he needed to find a place to sleep. And even if he didn't hate motels, he didn't have enough for the cheapest place in this expensive city, so…

He found his way to a storage unit business on the outskirts, and slipped around the back where they usually had the unoccupied ones. Sure enough, one of the pin codes was still set to 0000.

Xie Lian had a certain honour code with these things. He always left a unit exactly as he found it, and any place that harboured him for a night's sleep would receive an episode of his show for free advertising, such as it was. Most declined, so he'd just offer some free work. He'd go to the reception in the morning.

He shook open the thin mat he always kept rolled up in his bag, and the sleeping bag. It was quite a cold spring night tonight, but he was used to cold seeping through the metal. He hadn't frozen to death yet, these nine years.

It was very strange to feel fondness for something so cold and uniform as a plain, grey metal locker, identical to the three hundred others like it in this lot and the thousands like it across the country.

But somewhere in the past nine years, to him storage units had gone from monotonous to… unwavering. A comforting constant. Finding himself alone and cold in a unit just like this was the birth of the concept for *Scrap Collector*, and all of the ups and downs of his life since.

He shut the door, and lay down to rest in the pitch dark. He stroked the metal of the walls absent-mindedly, as he always did to stave off the pang of loneliness he felt when the door closed and the dark descended. He reminded himself to stay positive.

Things weren't so bad, in the end. He'd figure it out; he always did.

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In the morning, Xie Lian cracked the door open to allow for some light as he completed his morning stretches.

He had life on the road down to an art. He brushed his teeth and did his best to comb his hair, which was getting too long. He dressed in his simple uniform of a plain, long sleeved white t-shirt and jeans, with a white infinity scarf around his neck (essential for sudden dust or unexpected smells). Lastly, his hat, through which his messy bun poked through. A slightly dirty white cap with the logo from the very first business he filmed at. It was his favourite possession.

"Alright! Season nine, time to begin," he murmured to himself with a smile.

He creaked the door open, and noted the gloomy skies and rain coursing off the red sign for 'Yujun Mountain Lockers.' He dodged the raindrops all the way to reception, and asked if there were any lockers which had passed the statutory period for abandonment.

Storage reality shows with bigger budgets than his could afford to bid for unopened lockers, but he couldn't, so he generally went for the lockers which had already been picked over for

the best things and needed to be finally cleared out. It was surprising how much he and other storage hunters differed on what they considered 'best.'

The embittered woman at the front desk, name tag Xuan Ji, shrugged and told him he could do whatever he wanted, because nothing mattered anyway. He thanked her happily, and began to set up inside Unit 283.

Once he was done with this, he would sign the documents, courier them, and move on to somewhere new. He'd always wanted to go south, to the desert, even though it was hard to get to.

He unfurled his collapsible tripod and small camera.

He didn't have the money, help or muscles to lug something big around with him every day, so as with all things he owned, his camera was small and portable. It was also definitely on its last legs; the battery was so shot it typically only gave him around seventeen minute takes before he had to charge it again.

He didn't edit. He hadn't the resources, and he felt it was honest work to simply send the files to be uploaded exactly as they were. An unfiltered approach, which suited his show just fine.

He began his take with his usual opening lines.

"Welcome, my friends!" he said enthusiastically. "Today, we're at locker 283 at Yujun Mountain Storage. I wonder what wonders we'll wonder about today!"

Most strangely, this unit seemed to be filled with no fewer than sixteen different wedding dresses. He felt the thrum of satisfaction at an interesting find, and began to talk to the camera, exclaiming at the dresses and musing on how they all came to be in one place.

Many were clearly of different eras from one another, which made this one of the most fascinating lockers Xie Lian had found in some time. His enthusiasm brimmed over as he exclaimed over the history the dresses must hold.

And love stories, of course! Not that he knew anything about that.

He was just finishing up putting the dresses in boxes to deliver to charity when his phone vibrated in his pocket. Xie Lian took it out: Ling Wen. How strange.

"Xie Lian, The Scrap Collector!"

She paused only briefly at his greeting. "Uh, yes. Good morning, Xie Lian. I was wondering…have you couriered those documents yet?"

"Nope!" he said cheerfully. "I was going to do that just now. Why?"

"Ah," she said, voice strange. "Well…there have just been a few unexpected developments since the cancellation statement went live, it's really best you come in to discuss-"

Xie Lian heard a knock at the metal door. He turned in surprise, clutching a wedding dress to his collar instinctively, before remembering that unlike many previous knocks at his lockers in the early morning, he was not naked.

A man stood outside. He was tall. Xie Lian couldn't see his face underneath his red umbrella, but he had a lean, lithe figure. He was clothed in a dark red sweater and black jeans, with expensive looking black boots.

Strangely, though, there was a large, sleek black camera bag over his shoulder. The waterproof, professional kind that held camera models that Xie Lian couldn't possibly dream of affording.

"Am I late, boss?" came the teasing voice.

Xie Lian's brow furrowed in confusion. "I- I'm sorry?" This person clearly had the wrong locker.

He took a step forward to try to see the stranger's face, and promptly tripped over the long train of the wedding dress still in his hands.

The stranger lurched forward to grab him, and held him up as Xie Lian gasped apologies. Xie Lian's eyes adjusted, and he found himself going quite pink and frozen.

It *wasn't* the handsomeness, he firmly decided. *Falling* was the explanation for his blush, not this stranger's face, with its proud brows and high cheekbones and the long wisps of black hair escaping from his braid as he looked down at him in amused concern. Xie Lian was just very unused to anyone catching him when he fell.

He realised with a start that the stranger's arms were still around him, and he was gawping up at him underneath a dripping umbrella, being stared at because he had been asked a question and hadn't heard a word of it.

"Eh?" he gulped.

"I said, are you alright, boss?"

"Boss?" he breathed. "I- I'm afraid you must be looking for someone else-"

"You are filming *Scrap Collector*, yes?"

Xie Lian quite liked the man's voice. It was playful, even though the words were very confusing to him.

"Well…yes!" he said, more baffled by the second. "But…who are you? Why are you calling me boss?"

The man's eyes searched his. His gaze was very direct. It made him a little intimidating, despite the smile that seemed permanently etched at the corners of his lips.

"Ah. I see. You have not been informed? I sent an email."

Emails, winced Xie Lian. “Ah I’m, um- not great with emails,” he said, growing warmer still upon realising he had still made no effort to extricate himself. In his defence, the wedding dress was twisted around his legs, forming a sort of lower half straightjacket.

“I see. Well then,” replied the man, eyes twinkling. He let Xie Lian go and closed the umbrella smoothly, propping it against the unit wall. He then knelt down to carefully untangle his legs from the dress, as Xie Lian stood too open-mouthed to protest.

Chore done, he rose to his full height again, and straightened more formally. He stretched out his hand in an offer of a handshake.

“I called you boss because you are my boss. It really is my most sincere pleasure to meet you,” he said, cocking his head with a smile. “You can call me San Lang. I’m your new producer.”

Xie Lian’s mouth fell open.

“My *what?!”*

A muffled sigh emanated from the phone speaker, clutched against his chest in his increasingly white-knuckled hand.

“I’m still on the line, by the way. But yes- he’s right.”

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Chapter End Notes

Fic is retweetable here if you fancy doing so!

Lord Chengzhu Wants, Lord Chengzhu Gets

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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"I…I'll call you back, Ling Wen," stuttered Xie Lian as he fumbled to hang up the phone. He was staring. San Lang was staring back, unfazed.

Xie Lian shook his head in disbelief. "You're going to have to run that by me again."

San Lang smiled. "You had a significant investor last night. Or rather, Heavenly Capital Studios did. But on the condition that your show gets a new producer."

Xie Lian really was having a strange morning. "Who invested?!"

San Lang shrugged. "A silent investor."

"Do you know them?!"

"I know they're a big fan."

Xie Lian frowned. "That can't be right. No one watches my show."

"Well, someone does. Someone with a lot of money."

Xie Lian realised he was being somewhat rude. Whatever mental crisis he was having, he was still being a bad host to this …San Lang man. His producer, San Lang. His very normal man San Lang. No! Not *his* man, just… *a* man, who was now his producer-

Xie Lian shook himself slightly. "I'm very sorry, I just really didn't expect this! Um…are you from the Studio?"

He laughed through his nose. "No. I would never work for them. I'm an…independent contractor."

"Oh! That's…well, alright- but wait, then how were you hired?"

"I got an email."

"Oh. And you just…took the job?" he said weakly. He must have really needed the work. "Oh dear, you really should know what you're getting into! This will be no good for your resumé, not at all! It's my last season, and I've already been cancelled, and I really assure you that no one watches my show-"

"I'm a fan. That's why I took the job."

Xie Lian squinted up at him, looking for any hint of a joke. “Surely you’re kidding.”

“I am not. I’ve seen every episode. I’m very honoured to work with you.”

Xie Lian didn’t know what to do with himself. The day after he gets cancelled, and he suddenly has *two* whole fans? One of whom is apparently rich enough to force the studio to give him a *producer?!*

“I…I see.” He adjusted his hat nervously. “Um, you should know I’ve never worked with anyone before, on this show.”

“I am aware. Don’t worry. I won’t be coming in and making big changes.”

“You won’t?”

“No. I think your show is great. Like I said, I’m a fan. I’m just here to help, in any way you want the help. I can film, scout, set up, do lighting, driving, whatever you need. I just want to make things easier for you.”

“Oh,” he gawped. The air in the unit was feeling quite close and suffocating. He had no idea what to do, or say. Those jobs were far more than just a producer’s job. What was he supposed to-

“Boss. How about we have something to eat? We can talk about it further.”

“Oh!” he remembered. “Ling Wen- that’s the head lawyer at the studio- just said I have to come in and discuss this right away!”

“She can wait,” he replied idly. “Let’s get some food first. On me.”

“Oh…no, I should treat you-!”

“I insist.”

Typically, city areas with enough room for storage businesses did not also host a lot of fancy restaurants. Xie Lian was used to living around the industrial outskirts of most towns, but this San Lang person didn’t look like the type to have much experience living in places dominated by roller doors, oil stains and tumbleweeds formed from old newspaper.

“There won’t be much around here-”

“I brought my truck. I know a place on the way.”

“Oh.”

Xie Lian had forgotten that people often had their own transport.

“Alright,” he said cautiously. “I…just promised that I’d clear this out and drop it off to a charity store…”

“No problem. I’ll help with the boxes.”

Xie Lian watched limply as San Lang proceeded to roll up his expensive looking (cashmere?) sleeves and pick up the boxes by himself, while still balancing his camera bag and opening his umbrella with the other hand.

Strong, he thought, reminding himself to close his mouth.

San Lang was staring at him, so Xie Lian quickly checked behind him, until he realised San Lang was waiting for him to go outside so he could hold the umbrella for him.

“Oh, you don’t have to-” he paused. San Lang had not moved. He gave up, and meekly walked under his umbrella, following him to an almost obnoxiously shiny black pickup truck parked out front.

San Lang deposited the boxes carefully in the back, and pulled the cover over. Xie Lian was not a short man, but he still had to hop up and shuffle awkwardly into the carriage just to get inside.

“This is a very nice truck,” he said, touching the leather in awe.

San Lang got in in one smooth, sweeping movement. “It’s alright.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. He wondered if San Lang was really a fan, or if he was just being nice. He needed to mention it now, before it got any worse.

“Um…I have no budget on this show. Genuinely none. I have incidentals of around twenty dollars a day and I make some cash from my finds now and then but…I can’t pay you.”

“I’m not contracted to you, or your studio; I’m contracted to the silent investor. Don’t worry about how I’m paid. And I’m…aware of your incidentals amount.” His fingers tightened on the steering wheel as he turned the ignition, and he looked briefly grumpy.

Xie Lian cleared his throat. “Um…yes. It was a leftover incidental in my old contract, back from when everything was catered on-set anyway. It was supposed to be my coffee budget.”

“What about your accommodation while you film?”

Xie Lian shifted his feet in the gigantic footwell as San Lang began to drive.

“Ah, that’s not covered. I make do with all sorts but…does your new contract cover that-”

“It covers whatever I want. Don’t worry. I really am just here to help you. You will not be on twenty dollars a day this season, and you will stay in comfort,” he said firmly, eyes narrowing as he steered.

“Oh, I couldn’t possibly take anything from your budget! I’ve done alright, all these years.”

“The money is for the show. You are the show,” said San Lang.

Xie Lian sighed. He couldn't do that.

He could imagine what San Lang was thinking. He just hoped San Lang wouldn't feel too bad about quitting once he realised what he had signed up for. It was for the best; he seemed like someone far too elegant to be rooting around storage units all day with someone who was, for all intents and purposes, homeless.

Xie Lian noted that he had a bright red line tattooed around his finger. San Lang caught him looking.

He smiled, flexing his fingers. "A little reminder of fate."

Xie Lian nodded curiously. "Do you have any more tattoos?" He couldn't see any.

San Lang raised an eyebrow, and Xie Lian's ears began to burn. He hadn't meant to sound so…

"Ah ah ah," he waved frantically. "I didn't mean to pry. Ignore me, haha! It's just been a while since I've had a real chat with anybody. I've lost my manners."

San Lang was quiet for a moment. "Your manners seem fine to me. And you can chat with me however you like, boss."

Xie Lian coughed. "Um…maybe don't call me boss. I really don't have the credentials to back that up."

"What would you prefer?"

"Um…well, my name is Xie Lian."

"I know. But isn't that a little too familiar? You're older than me. How about gege?"

Xie Lian blinked at him. Wasn't that even more familiar?

"Very well," he said weakly. "How old are you, exactly?"

"I'm twenty five."

"Oh," hupped Xie Lian, feeling ancient.

They found a strange little cafe named 'Delicacies of the Mortal Realm,' and sat to order. The waiter was quite odd looking, with a protruding nose rather like a chicken beak.

"Welcome back, Lord," he nodded excitedly, rubbing his hands together in a simpering manner over a suspiciously greasy apron.

"Thank you. Gege, what would you like?"

"Oh, just something simple."

"Simple it is," bowed the waiter. "I'll be right back, Lord and guest!"

San Lang smirked, pouring them both water.

“Um…why does he call you Lord?”

San Lang crooked an eyebrow. “Oh, it’s my online name. Lord Chengzhu. Most of my production experience is self-produced shows. I have a decent following among some pretty unsavoury characters.”

Xie Lian looked at him nervously. “Why? What do you produce?”

“Oh, a bit of everything. But I’m mostly known for gambling. For some reason, my followers quite enjoy watching me do it.”

“Oh,” said Xie Lian, relaxing. Just gambling. That wasn’t so bad. More than once he’d accidentally bumped into some porn productions being filmed in storage units, and seen things he’d never unsee.

They talked as they ate their meal, scrambled eggs with tomatoes. It was delicious. Xie Lian inhaled it. He had to rely on his own cooking most of the year while he was filming. Despite his efforts to spice up his meals, they were usually just some combination of rice and vegetables turned to mush.

He learned that San Lang had been producing his own shows on Youtube for around five years now. *Gambler’s Den* was his most popular show, but he’d also made a few documentaries about ancient weapons and, surprisingly, sculpting.

“Really?” said Xie Lian, fascinated. He didn’t seem…

“Mmm. I like to sculpt. It’s relaxing.”

Xie Lian avoided looking at his long, slender fingers. “Right,” he said vaguely, missing his mouth with his fork.

San Lang was coy and dismissive about his follower count, but two more patrons of the cafe recognised him and asked him to sign their- well, one excitable woman started lifting up her shirt before San Lang waved her off and signed a napkin instead. Clearly he was popular.

“I wish I could be on the internets,” said Xie Lian longingly. “It’s not possible, in my contract.”

“Mmm. Yes. I had a look.”

“You did?” said Xie Lian, egg wobbling dangerously on his fork. “Why?”

“It was sent to me,” said San Lang, matter of fact. “Quite a diabolical document.”

Xie Lian shrugged, charitably. “It was what I had to work with.”

“Mmm.” San Lang seemed quite content, watching him with his chin in his hands. “Is it good, gege?”

Xie Lian stilled. San Lang's voice was really a little too playful. He wasn't sure how to handle it, so he just choked instead.

San Lang didn't miss a beat, slapping his back firmly but gently to help.

"Ah, thank you," Xie Lian coughed.

Xie Lian finished in silence. He just didn't know what to make of all this. Every time he thought a new detail about his show, his circumstances, his *life* might faze San Lang, he just smoothly nodded like it was no big deal.

"We should, um, make our way to the studio," he said. Ling Wen had already called twice more and sent several texts.

"I'm in no rush," said San Lang, hands behind his head. "But if gege wants to go, let's go."

Xie Lian nodded. He tried to split the bill, and San Lang just shook his head and fixed him with a look. "As I said, gege. You will be buying whatever you want from now on."

Xie Lian almost laughed, incredulous. Things that were too good to be true usually were, but he nonetheless accepted the breakfast. It would likely be the only good one he'd get before the Capital found a loophole to stop all of this nonsense. In the meantime, he would have a nice day with his new- erm- with this man.

They drove to the office, and parked in the garage Xie Lian hadn't even known existed. San Lang pressed the elevator button for the top floor quite assuredly.

"How do you know where to go?"

"We'll be talking to the biggest assholes here, no? Of course they'll be on the top floor."

Xie Lian was so shocked he laughed. San Lang looked pleased. "You're…a little rude, San Lang," he said, realising it sounded like he was scolding him.

San Lang didn't seem to mind. In fact, he winked. "Only to those who deserve it, gege."

The elevator dinged open. Xie Lian made to walk out, and stopped.

Every single employee on the floor was staring, stock still and silent. More than one person was standing up to crane their necks over their cubicles.

It seems they were expected.

Xie Lian instinctively checked to make sure he wasn't covered in something gross, which was often the case, but his clothes were clean. He looked up nervously, and realised that all of the eyes were not on him, but on San Lang, who was still leaning casually against the elevator wall.

He pushed off with his foot, and ambled out. "Lead the way, gege?" he said, utterly ignoring the looks.

“Um, yes,” said Xie Lian, conscious of how many people were eavesdropping on their every word.

All of the rooms on this floor were glass. Xie Lian could already see Ling Wen and Jun Wu in his corner office. What he didn’t expect was a clearly agitated Mu Qing and Feng Xin, gesturing angrily.

He faltered, only for a moment.

San Lang noticed.

“Aren’t they your two ex co-stars, gege?”

“You watched *Flower Crowned Prince?!”*

“Mmm.”

“Ah,” cringed Xie Lian. That was embarrassing. “Yes. Mu Qing and Feng Xin.”

San Lang’s eyes took on a strange glint. “Excellent.”

Ling Wen’s eyes found them, and her mouth moved. Mu Qing and Feng Xin whipped around to watch them approach.

Xie Lian rapped his fist on the glass door through which they could all clearly see him, and further embarrassed himself by saying “Knock knock!”

All four straightened warily, and paid him no attention. Their gazes were fixed on San Lang.

Jun Wu gave his tightest smile and gestured them inside.

“Please come in. And Mu Qing, Feng Xin, we will require the room.”

Their faces were mutinous.

“Sir, we really must insist we discuss-”

“You can’t just-”

“The room please, gentlemen.”

San Lang turned a laugh into an unconvincing cough, and took a seat as they stomped out of the room. Mu Qing hovered angrily by Xie Lian’s ear just for a second, and muttered to him very quietly.

“Be careful of him.”

Xie Lian blinked. Mu Qing was always too suspicious and paranoid. Of everyone in this room, San Lang had given him the least reason to worry.

San Lang placed his hands behind his head, and leaned back in his chair. It was rude. Jun Wu's eyes twitched a fraction narrower.

"Well. It's a pleasure to meet you. Tell me, what name do you prefer?" said Jun Wu, voice soft and careful. "Lord Chengzhu, or Hua Cheng?"

"Either will do," he replied sardonically.

Xie Lian's brow furrowed. Had he heard wrong? But he had said San Lang…

"You understand we find ourselves a little surprised by the turn of events today."

"Yes," San Lang agreed. He said nothing else.

Ling Wen cleared her throat. "We wanted to ask if you have had contact with the silent investor in question. We've been in contact only via email with them for weeks, so it was a surprise to suddenly receive this condition right before the funds were transferred into escrow."

Xie Lian's frown deepened. Escrow?

"No. I've only had contact to receive and accept my offer."

"You are in the habit of accepting job offers from strangers via email?" asked Jun Wu, fingers steepled.

San Lang simply cocked his head and smiled.

Ling Wen interjected delicately. "We confirmed the legitimacy. It is a sizeable investment. But the condition for the release of the funds-"

"I understand funds being held in escrow is perfectly standard for investments?"

"Yes, but…for normal conditions. Like acquisition of assets or intellectual property rights. Not…this."

San Lang shrugged. "Why are you telling me? I'm not the showrunner, and I don't own any rights. I'm just the producer, and it's only my first day."

Jun Wu's fingers twitched. "Xianle, would you like to tell us who the investor is?"

"I have no idea!" he breathed. "Truly! I… truth be told, I still haven't seen the email?"

Ling Wen stared at him, nostrils flaring. "Here."

She handed over her phone. The email was bright and white on the screen.

To: jun.wu@HCS.com "Jun Wu"; ling.wen@HCS.com "Ling Wen"

From: CRSF@supremefinance.com "Crimson Rain Sought Flower Investments"

Subject: On Scrap Collector's Cancellation/Updated Terms for Investment

May 26, 2016 7:12 PM

Immediate Attention: Chief Executive Officer Jun Wu

You will note the below transfer details for my silent investment in Heavenly Capital Studios.

I now have one sole condition, and the funds will be held in escrow until completion of these terms.

Scrap Collector will receive a new producer, who will be allowed to produce the full ninth season, with the showrunner's permission. Any interference with my terms will result in withdrawal of the funds in their entirety.

As a gesture of good faith, I have released 2% to your bank.

The producer I have chosen has already accepted my offer, and will be in contact in due course.

The email was not signed.

Ling Wen retracted her phone. "I must say, your method of 'contacting us' was unusual, Hua Cheng."

San Lang shrugged. "It's generating some buzz, I suppose."

He glanced at Xie Lian, and smiled at his confusion.

"Oh, gege- I posted a video to let my fans know I'll be on hiatus while filming *Scrap Collector* with you. I tagged the Heavenly Capital Studios' account in the video. Faster than an email. Figured I'd give the social media people a slightly more interesting workday."

Xie Lian bit back a smile, despite himself.

Ling Wen eyed them. "Do you two know each other?"

"No! We only met this morning!" insisted Xie Lian. "Wait a minute…how many people saw that video?"

"I haven't checked in a few hours gege, because we've been together."

Xie Lian's eyes widened.

"But last I looked, it was at fifteen million around an hour after I posted it, so probably more now."

“It’s at forty now,” said Ling Wen idly.

Xie Lian gasped. *“Forty mill-”*

Jun Wu jumped in, sensing the loss of control. “I should reiterate what we said in reply to the investor, as you may not be aware. We will not be changing the terms of the contract for *Scrap Collector.* ”

“Why would I change the contract? I’m not a lawyer. But it looks fine to me.”

Jun Wu’s jaw tightened. “You are satisfied with it currently?”

“It has all the provisions we need.”

“You will have no distribution rights, no merchandise, no promotion or publicity rights. The budget will also remain unchanged.”

“Luckily I’m an independent producer then, with my own generous budget to be spent however I wish.”

“And how will that be?”

“To produce and film the show to the showrunner’s liking, and to ensure its showrunner is treated appropriately.”

A muscle leapt in Jun Wu’s jaw. “I see.”

Xie Lian shifted in his seat, feeling like he should say something. Partially because it had taken a third mention of the word ‘showrunner’ to realise San Lang meant him.

“Um…I do give my permission.”

Ling Wen frowned at him. Jun Wu suddenly met his eyes, and Xie Lian rather thought he looked like a parent annoyed at their child for speaking out of turn at the dinner table.

“Pardon, Xianle?”

Xie Lian took a deep breath, and persevered. “The email said that the terms were a producer for my whole ninth season, with my permission. I’m giving my permission.”

San Lang beamed at him. “Well, there you have it.” He stood. “We must be going.”

“You’re leaving?” Ling Wen’s brows furrowed even deeper.

He paused, eyebrows raised innocently. “Is there really anything else to discuss?”

Jun Wu’s expression was thunderous, until it changed. Smoothed out, and became pleasant.

“Very well,” he said, rising to his feet to splay his hands on his desk, the picture of a collected CEO. “We here at Heavenly Capital Studios wish you both luck in your final season of *Scrap Collector.*”

San Lang smiled very sweetly. “The email said ninth season. It never said final.”

And he walked out the door.

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ChickenGhost @GamblersHen · May 26, 2016

GHOST CITIZENS: #SCRAPCOLLECTOR SEASON 9 AIRS THURSDAYS AT 2AM ON 233, STARTING NEXT WEEK.

64 737 9.4K

GhostTitizen @Horny4Chengzhu · May 26, 2016

WAIT SO THIS PREMIERE IS ON REAL TV? AT A SPECIFIC TIME? CHENGZHU HAS US LIVING IN THE OLDEN TIMES! ADORABLE!

3 6 42

DoubleSix @DiceCup · May 26, 2016

WHY CAN'T I FIND *ANYTHING* ABOUT THIS SHOW ONLINE? #SCRAPCOLLECTOR

16 63 2.8K

GhostArmyMod @Chengzhu4Prez · May 26, 2016

CHENGZHU SAID THERE IS NO PROMO, SO *WE* HAVE TO BE THE PROMO! WHAT CHENGZHU WANTS, CHENGZHU GETS

8 5 114

BUTCHER ZHU
@ThighMeat

OK CITIZENS, I FOUND THE LINKS, NOW IN BIO! SOMEONE HAS BEEN POSTING FULL EPISODES FOR YEARS-MALICES AND MENACES YOU BETTER WATCH EVERY SINGLE EP OR THE SAVAGES WILL COOK YOU #SCRAPCOLLECTOR

12:06 PM · May 2016, 2016 · Twitter for iPhone

77 Retweets **17** Quote Tweets **492** Likes

IceIce @Babee · May 26, 2016

Wtf is Scrap Collector and why are Ghost Citizens so freaking extra always in all caps???

21 69 420

MaliceMob @GhostFire · May 26, 2016

SO CHENGZHU CAN HEAR US #SCRAPCOLLECTOR

64 737 9.4K

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Chapter End Notes

Fic is retweetable here if you fancy doing so!

Oh also this is set in 2016 for reasons.

And...Action!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

***

Xie Lian was having such an *excellent* week.

That first day, Xie Lian had scrambled out of Jun Wu's office behind San Lang, who strode confidently into the elevator. He only briefly paused to throw over his shoulder: "I'd watch this season, if I were you."

Despite fifty wide open mouths behind him, not a word was said in reply.

Back in the truck, San Lang simply turned to him, and asked: "Where are we headed?"

Xie Lian was feeling a little giddy. He probably shouldn't make important decisions like this.

"I hadn't planned the locations for the season yet. I just kind of…go wherever I can get to. And I um…can't drive, by the way."

"You can go wherever you want to now, gege. I'll take you. Where have you always wanted to film?"

Xie Lian bit his lip, and turned to him.

"San Lang…are you sure about this? Life on the road, storage units…it's not glamorous. There's junk and there's gross fluids and roaches and raccoons and meth labs, and one time I got lead poisoning and- oh! Another time I accidentally got locked inside a unit with five families and loaded on a truck and then I think *technically* we were human trafficked-?"

"Gege. I'm in this, all the way."

Xie Lian shut up.

"And I will also not permit any further bad things to happen to you. I'm sorry that I-" San Lang stopped, and swallowed. "I only wish I could have helped you earlier."

Xie Lian breathed a slightly hysterical laugh at that one. "You can't promise no bad things, San Lang. And that's outside the bounds of a producer anyway, don't you think?"

San Lang shrugged. "No paths are bound." He turned the truck out of the parking garage.

"Left or right, gege?"

Xie Lian closed his eyes, and smiled.

“Right.”

***

They didn’t plan the drive. San Lang seemed to want to get as far away from the Capital as possible too, which suited Xie Lian fine. Xie Lian half-mentioned the desert, and San Lang immediately turned south. They just drove until they felt like stopping for snacks, and chatted about their lives.

Xie Lian found San Lang extremely interesting.

He borrowed his phone to watch a few episodes of *Gambler’s Den* while they were driving, but kept stopping every few seconds to say “Oh, San Lang, that’s ridiculous! Did he really bet ten years of his life? How would that even work?” or “That’s so funny. There’s no right way to shake a dice cup.”

“Sure there is, gege. Come on my show sometime, after we wrap. I’ll show you.”

Eventually, he gave up and just asked San Lang to tell him about his favourite episodes. Which he did, in exchange for Xie Lian telling him about his own favourites of *Scrap Collector*. Xie Lian was astonished at how many hours on the road passed so quickly while they were talking.

He also did a little research, as surreptitiously as he could.

Lord Chengzhu was considered the biggest ‘ghost’ influencer in the world. That is, someone who influenced trends without actually endorsing or selling anything, or using their real name. San Lang had fifty million subscribers, who called themselves ‘Ghost Citizens.’

Come to think of it, Xie Lian realised that he’d been seeing hints of him for years in fashion trends young people wore: white flowers on lapels (“I just like them”), silver vambrances (“all that jingling is distracting to my opponents, gege”), tailor made sleek black suits and satin red shirts. They looked better on him, though.

“Are there any other ghost influencers?”

He smiled. “A few. Black Water is the other big one. We’re friends, online at least. He’s big on competitive eating. Genuinely impressive appetite for such a skinny guy. Never shows his full face though, only the lower half of it.”

Xie Lian typed with his index fingers only, so he took a while to search things sometimes. He was also not very good at the Youtube, let alone the Twitter. But-

“It looks like the third biggest is called Green Ghost? Are you friends with him too?”

San Lang’s mouth tightened. “No. I most certainly am not.”

“What does he do?”

“He’s a ripoff of both of us, but…tasteless. He posts videos of himself at live gambling tournaments, but he’s a lot more famous for his trash talking than he is for his results. And he eats things too, but only if they’re disgusting. Rotten, putrid, mouldy, raw flesh, you get the picture. He’s doing it for shock value. He’s only a ghost influencer because no advertisers will touch him.”

“Oh. He doesn’t sound very nice.”

“He isn’t. Don’t sully your eyes and ears with his filth, gege.”

“I’m sorry that you have to deal with him.”

He looked down, and saw a video with millions of hits entitled: LoRD ChENgZhu PwNS GreEN GHOst So HArD BLoOD RaINS FrOM TeH CEiLiNG, and decided he didn’t fancy watching that.

“Where would you like to stay tonight, gege?”

“San Lang, did you know you can look up storage businesses *online?* And if you press this icon here, this balloon thing, it will show where they *all are* on a map? I’m so glad we went over that bump before, or I’d never have clicked it! Anyway, there’s a business a few hours away! Very out of the way place, which should make for some interesting finds. Not sure where we can stay, though. I um…don’t really enjoy motels.”

“Mmm. Tell me the name?”

“Gobi Storage.”

“I’m on it.”

San Lang raised his fingers to his temple, and spoke into an earpiece Xie Lian hadn’t even known was there. Xie Lian was feeling so relaxed and content he barely listened, but he did catch the words “No. Nothing less than the best.”

Xie Lian stifled a snort. There wouldn’t even be campsites with electricity out here.

He had to choke back his surprise, then, when they pulled into the carpark of Gobi Storage to find that two gigantic, ostentatious silk yurts had been set up next to it in the sand.

He stumbed out of the car and stared at them in awe. “How did this happen?”

San Lang spared the yurts a glance, unloading his camera. “Ah, yes. My Citizens are very excited. And generous.”

“They did this? And didn’t even stick around?” asked Xie Lian in wonder.

“My most devoted Citizens know I don’t like to be crowded, especially when with a guest. I asked for our accommodation for the night, and they delivered my demands. They are perfectly happy to just follow my orders, and leave.”

Xie Lian swallowed, mouth dry. It was blistering hot, but a brief shiver went down his spine. San Lang was being very…domineering.

“Do you want to look inside before we film, gege?” said San Lang, looking down at him in amusement.

Xie Lian could only nod with his mouth open.

They walked over, and San Lang opened one of the yurt's silk flaps and gestured him in. Xie Lian gasped. Inside was an entire canopy bed, a couch, a mini refrigerator, even a bar! There were fresh flowers in a vase, and a card on the low table with the teapot and teacups. It read: *“We Stan Scrap Gege!”*

Xie Lian squinted at it. Stan? “Um-”

“It means they’re fans, gege.”

“Oh!” He doubted it, but it was nice nonetheless. San Lang moved over to the back to peek out behind the tent. “Perfect. It would have been a disaster without a fire pit,” he muttered.

“A what!?” Xie Lian bounded over.

Sure enough, there was a fire pit ready to be lit, with a black iron pot hanging from the kindling. It was overlooking the dunes in the distance, with silk cushions on the sand ready for a beautiful outdoor dinner.

“Wow! Oh, but I think I only have a few carrots and some rice in my bag-”

“The fridges will be fully stocked,” said San Lang confidently.

Xie Lian felt the surge of determination. “Well then. I will cook for you tonight San Lang! To thank you for all your work!”

“No thanks needed. But I will happily eat anything you make for me.”

Xie Lian ducked his head, trying not to grin too much. He’d already done that far too much today.

“Should we…should we film?”

“Absolutely. I can’t wait, gege.”

***

They stopped at the reception, and asked about the units. Surprisingly, Xie Lian had to do absolutely zero bargaining, cajoling or begging. The woman behind the desk instantly agreed when she saw San Lang, twirling her hair and giggling.

Xie Lian was feeling slightly out of sorts as San Lang busied himself with setting up. San Lang even gave him the eye when Xie Lian absent mindedly pulled out his ancient, rusty

boom with its fluffy grey moth eaten cover, and insisted he would not ever have to use that again.

So Xie Lian found himself twisting his hands as San Lang handled the light, camera, and an overhead boom stand. Everything was brand new, and top of the line. Xie Lian didn't have to lift a finger.

And then San Lang called "Action" and Xie Lian just…stood there blinking at him.

Mercifully, San Lang sensed something was wrong, and cut quickly.

He moved out from behind the camera and approached him. "I'm sorry, gege, I shouldn't have gone so fast. I just know you like doing things unedited, unscripted, right?"

"Well…yes, I tend to do things in one take."

"Am I throwing you off?"

Xie Lian gulped, craning his neck up to meet his eyes. "No," he lied.

San Lang grinned goodnaturedly. "I am. Of course I am, this is new for you to do it this way. If this isn't what you want, say the word and we'll use your equipment, or I can leave and you just do things the way you-"

"No!" insisted Xie Lian. "My camera barely even works, and a rat once tried to mate with my boom! Your equipment is so beautiful, of course we should use it! And I- I don't mind you watching, it's just…"

San Lang cocked his head. "It's just?"

Xie Lian sighed, and squared his shoulders. He needed to get this out of the way.

"San Lang…you're a fan of my show, yes?"

"The biggest," he replied swiftly.

"Alright. And…you think your followers might watch my show if you're producing it, right?"

"I know they will."

"And you really think we can get to eighty million viewers for a cable access show on channel 233, that broadcasts at 2am, without any promotion or advertising?"

"I know we can. I'm going to make it happen," he vowed.

"And you like to gamble, yes?"

San Lang frowned at the change in questions, but played along. "Yes."

Xie Lian folded his arms, and smiled at him sweetly.

“Well then. Just how much money are you going to win if you can get my show to eighty million?”

San Lang’s mouth fell open. “Gege-”

“It’s alright, San Lang. If I were a gambling man, and someone offered me a job turning the worst show on air into one with eighty million viewers…well…those would be some pretty interesting odds! I’d just prefer to know these things up front.”

“That’s *not* what I’m doing, gege. I promise. And your show is the best show on air.”

San Lang looked very concerned. Xie Lian stifled a laugh and kept his most serious interrogation face, squinting up at him.

“You’re not betting on my show?”

“No.”

Xie Lian raised an eyebrow. “Are your Citizens betting on my show?”

“Well, I imagine some of them are laying some decent odds as we speak, but I *promise* gege: there is no monetary gain or bet of any kind involved in my contract, or in my reasons for accepting it. I want you to get your viewers for no other reason than you deserve it. That’s it.”

San Lang was quite endearing when he was serious.

Xie Lian cocked his head. “Really?”

“Really. I would never be insincere to you. I’m very sorry that I’ve given you reason to distrust me so.” He was gripping the boom stand tightly.

Xie Lian made a disappointed noise in his throat.

“Hmm. Pity,” he shrugged.

San Lang frowned. “Gege?”

“Seems like a wasted opportunity to me. Why wouldn’t you have made a bet? It’s only a bit of fun.”

San Lang’s mouth fell open. “You…you don’t care about that?”

“No, of course not!” said Xie Lian affably. “You’re a gambler, I would have expected nothing less! It’s none of my business, anyway. Why didn’t you?”

San Lang was starting to look a little like a dog with his tail between his legs. “I…wanted to prove my sincerity.”

“By doing the opposite of what your brand is about? Ah, such a shame San Lang, it could have been a really good bet. You could have made a lot of money if we pull this off,” sighed

Xie Lian ruefully.

San Lang was staring at him, discombobulated. Xie Lian stifled another laugh. It was somewhat fun to catch him off his guard like this. Ruffle him a bit. It was only fair, given Xie Lian had been ruffled from the moment they met.

San Lang opened his mouth. He spoke slowly, unsurely.

“Gege. Are you making fun of me?”

Xie Lian ignored him, and got back into position. “I’m ready now. Let’s go.”

San Lang stared at him dazed for another moment, then slunk back to the camera.

***

A few hours later by the fire pit, he watched apprehensively as San Lang bit into the- well, the consistency was a bit like pancake batter, but he called it a stew- and chewed.

“Perfection, gege,” he intoned. “You can put even more spice in next time, I can handle it.”

“Oh! Thank you for the feedback!”

Xie Lian was very pleased. It was a beautiful night in the desert. The sun was setting magnificently, nestled in orange and pink light. He was relaxed and content. They chatted as the stars came out. Xie Lian marvelled at them; they were so bright and so *many.* It was a lovely night to be sitting with an incredible change in fortune, and such a nice new person for company.

Xie Lian almost jumped out of his skin when he looked at his watch and realised it was nearly midnight. He’d absolutely talked San Lang’s ear off.

“Ah, I’m sorry San Lang! I’ve kept you up! Go, go sleep. I’ll see you in the morning, and thank you for everything.”

“No need to apologise, gege. It’s been a privilege to start getting to know you.”

Xie Lian gave up on being casual, and beamed at him. What a day.

San Lang bid him farewell to go to his own yurt, and for a moment Xie Lian was almost sad to say goodnight to him. Xie Lian slept so well that he didn’t wake up until ten am, in a panic at sleeping so late. San Lang just smiled, cooking him breakfast outside on the fire pit, and said that it was good that he had a nice rest.

He handed him the bowl casually. “You like eggs and tomatoes, right gege?”

Xie Lian, once again, could only nod with his mouth open.

***

They drove further south. As the landscape turned to more cracked, sandy ground, Xie Lian asked a question.

“San Lang…why did you get into this line of work?”

San Lang glanced at him, and was quiet for a while, thinking.

“I didn’t always have an easy time, growing up. One day, when I was at my lowest, I came across a TV crew for the show I loved. And the star…”

Xie Lian watched him carefully. This must be an important memory, for him.

“This person treated me as if I was really worth something. As if I was important, even though I was just a kid they didn’t know. They didn’t allow anyone to mistreat me. And it taught me that TV doesn’t have to be fake. That sometimes, there can be one person exactly as kind, and talented, and brave off camera as they are on screen. It meant everything to me, that my hero was exactly who I thought they were.”

“Wow,” he breathed. “I’m so glad for you, that someone treated you the way you deserved when you needed it most.”

San Lang nodded slowly. “Yes. I did need it. They saved my life.” He kept his head forward, but watched him out of the corner of his eye. “And now, I’ll help you with what you need.”

Xie Lian chuckled. “Thank you. How nice, for you to pay it forward.”

San Lang smiled, and kept his eyes on the wide open road.

***

As they pulled into their next stop, Xie Lian saw more yurts. But he also saw two people. Two people whose vibrating angry silhouettes he recognised from a quarter mile away. San Lang sighed irritably, and parked.

Xie Lian stumbled out of the truck. “Mu Qing, Feng Xin?! What are you doing here?”

“Hey,” grunted Feng Xin. Mu Qing folded his arms in his traditional manner of greeting.

San Lang exited the truck, eyeing them with displeasure. “We don’t require any new producers, but if you leave me your resumés, I can have one of my assistants give you a call with some pointers on how to have better resumés.”

Mu Qing’s mouth fell open indignantly. “You-!”

Xie Lian decided to blow past that. “How did you even find me?”

Feng Xin, whose scowl deepened every time he looked at San Lang, spoke.

“You wouldn’t believe how easy you are to track now. His *fans* are swarming social media every time he’s spotted. Someone actually triangulated a map of storage businesses in the

direction you were driving and calculated your stops by *percentage likelihood."*

Xie Lian shook his head in wonder. The internets really were incredible.

Mu Qing continued. "Then a whole team of them showed up and set up those yurts half an hour ago. They kept asking us if we know you," he said, jerking his thumb towards their van, which had the Heavenly Capital Studios logo on the side.

San Lang's arms were folded, and he squinted at the sun irritably, before shooting Mu Qing and Feng Xin a bored look. "I don't do selfies, you know."

"We aren't-" sputtered Mu Qing.

"We *don't want-* " seethed Feng Xin.

"Then why are you here? Stalking my talent?"

"*You're* the stalker!" hissed Feng Xin. "We're here because *someone* needs to supervise what you're up to!"

"Why?" said Xie Lian, baffled.

"You don't think it's weird that the biggest star on Youtube wants to leave that all behind for *your show?"* shot Mu Qing, voice dripping with suspicion.

"..." said Xie Lian, mildly affronted.

"What? You'd prefer I do your show?" said San Lang waspishly. "I've seen it. No thanks."

Feng Xin was practically vibrating with fury. "What are your intentions with him? He's been through enough-" he stopped, eyes briefly widening.

Xie Lian bit his cheek, and looked down.

Feng Xin tried again. "He's had enough to deal with. If you're making some sort of joke out of him, you'll be sorry."

San Lang went very still, and his eyes hardened. "That is not something I would ever do. And once again, if I was in the business of making jokes, I would have picked *your* show."

Mu Qing twitched forward. He was clearly seconds from launching himself at San Lang. Xie Lian stepped in front of him, as he had a feeling that San Lang could probably put Mu Qing on his back with a pinkie finger.

"Ah-ah-ah! Let's all just calm down, shall we! First of all, no one can make a joke of me if I refuse to be embarrassed. I'm proud of my show. Secondly, I think if we all decide to assume everyone here has good intentions, then we can all have a very nice day!"

"Well said, gege. I of course have good intentions towards you, but I won't lie and say that much with these two."

"Gege?!" repeated Mu Qing. "You…you don't even know this guy, Xie Lian. You met him *yesterday,* and he's calling you *gege?"*

Had it really only been two days? It felt like he'd known San Lang for much longer.

"Was he supposed to pick from the ranks of people he *does* know, to help him? It seems that's not been a winning strategy in the past, given he knew *you two,"* sneered San Lang.

"WHY ARE YOU DOING THIS?" said Feng Xin, actually stomping his foot.

"Enough!" called Xie Lian firmly. All three fell silent. He didn't get angry very often, but this was ridiculous. "I would like to film while we still have the light, and you're all wasting time with this."

San Lang bowed his head. "Of course, gege. I will go and scout some units for you, and set up. My apologies. To you specifically gege, not these two fuckwits."

He walked into the reception, and left the three of them standing awkwardly and avoiding eye contact.

"I…appreciate you checking in on me, but everything really is going fine," he said. "You didn't have to do this." He snuck a look at their dusty van. "It was a long drive. I'm sorry you had to come all the way here."

"You weren't answering your phone."

Xie Lian frowned. He'd had no reason to look at his phone in the last few days. He fished it out of his pocket, and gasped.

152 missed calls!? From all sorts of unknown numbers…It seemed that on a low battery, it no longer vibrated.

A second later, the screen went dead.

"Ah."

Well…people would call back another time, if it was important. And in any case…maybe the calls should now be going through his producer. He hid his grin, and put the phone back in his pocket.

"Gege?" called San Lang from the office. "They gave me the codes for some units. You can pick the best one."

"More than one?! You really are a smooth talker, San Lang!" he said happily.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin exchanged a glance. "San Lang?"

"Oh! Yes…um, it's probably not his real name."

Feng Xin slapped his forehead with his palm. Xie Lian peered at him in concern, he did look close to an aneurysm-

“Over here, gege!” said San Lang, strolling down the last aisle of units. “74 and 76. I'll meet you there with the equipment. Let me know if you need me to set up a security rope to keep…certain people out.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin bristled. Xie Lian was forcibly reminded of when the small terriers he owned as a child believed themselves to be guard dogs.

Xie Lian sighed. Once, these two were his closest friends.

“I need to head along to film now.”

Mu Qing was agitated. “Xie Lian, I don’t think you truly realise how crazy this guy is. Do you remember *Literature Gods?”*

Xie Lian stilled. *Literature Gods* was a show from their old rival network, Middlecourt. It aired in the same timeslot as *Flower Crowned Prince*, and showed popular celebrities reciting ancient poems and texts in period costumes. It had swooped in to poach nearly all of his staff even before *Flower Crowned Prince* was officially dead in the water.

It also devoted several episodes to selecting thinly veiled pieces about naïve, buffoonish princes to make fun of him, even going so far as to have the most popular young singer of the time dress up like him and set his own ass on fire at the climax of his poem.

“Yes. I remember.”

“He went on that show. Six years ago, when he was still up and coming, but they were at their peak. And he utterly destroyed it. Like, *destroyed* it. I don’t know what he did to them, but they refused to put out his episode, so he put out his own, with hidden camera footage of the producers being horrible, always acting like they were intellectuals and all their guests were stupid…”

Feng Xin nodded, eyes serious. “He even had interviews with a bunch of former guests talking about how abusive the showrunners were. He must have been planning to ruin them all along, Xie Lian. His fans went rabid. They literally formed a cyber army to hack their website, boycott the network, everything.”

Xie Lian sighed. “No one can be responsible for the actions of every fan.”

“Well that’s convenient, because some of them literally *burned down Middlecourt*. They tried to sue, but they couldn’t get enough proof that he ordered it, and all the NDAs he’d signed were ash by then.”

Xie Lian tried to care, but he really didn’t. “It *was* a cruel show,” he said quietly.

They stared at him, openmouthed.

“I don’t just mean that because it...it was right that they got burned down, or anything! But they were cruel to everyone. That singer got second degree burns! They didn’t put the flames out right away because they wanted the shot, for comedy. They were dangerous.”

“So is Hua Cheng.”

Xie Lian shook his head. “I know you think I’m naïve, still. I know I used to be, but I’m not anymore. I’m just optimistic. I lost the luxury of being naïve a long time ago.”

They said nothing. Xie Lian sighed, and walked away. He had work to do.

“Oh, and there are no motels anywhere near here. Let me know if you need sleeping bags.”

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Xie Lian should have felt nervous, doing his usual thing in front of San Lang. He was well aware that exclaiming over junk and deflated bicycle tyres was not most people’s idea of entertainment. But San Lang just stood and watched him, and the look in his eyes was kind and soft and amused and…

Entertained. He seemed genuinely entertained, stifling laughs behind the camera whenever Xie Lian made his silly jokes and smiling softly whenever Xie Lian got a little too excited about finding an old ride-on lawnmower.

This was exactly why he’d kept doing this, all these years. Because he’d hoped that he could make someone smile, and have a slightly nicer day. So Xie Lian wanted to make sure he did a good job. After all, San Lang was doing an excellent job.

They wrapped up after a twenty minute take. Xie Lian hovered over San Lang’s shoulder as he played some back for him. The quality was fantastic.

“It looks so much better!” he enthused.

“Mmm. Window dressing, gege. You are the content. We probably have enough for your first episode already.”

“I can’t believe it. Only a few more days til the premiere.”

“Millions are waiting, gege.”

Xie Lian chuckled. San Lang was so funny. “I really do appreciate your work, San Lang. It’s been such a long first few days for you. Let’s go, I shouldn’t be working you too hard; I’ll wear you out.”

San Lang laughed through his nose.

“I assure you gege, you could never wear me out.” His gaze was very direct.

Xie Lian’s ears went pink and he attempted to nod professionally, tripping on an old pile of magazines on the way out. Not having to clean everything out just for filming rights was

saving him so much time. He understood why he was having such luck; it was quite difficult to say no to San Lang.

They made their way to their new yurts as the sun set. Mu Qing and Feng Xin appeared to have fought over the van space in the back. Feng Xin looked like the winner, stretched out triumphant yet bloody nosed with a gallon of gas station coffee, while Mu Qing was napping cramped in the front seat.

Xie Lian inclined his head at him, as they went past. Feng Xin nodded, but his eyes followed San Lang with distrust.

“I hope they won’t be here all night, that’ll be uncomfortable for them.” He felt bad.

“Mmm. A crying shame. Here we are, gege.”

They settled into their yurts, and Xie Lian insisted on cooking again for dinner. San Lang asked to help him chop, and Xie Lian could hardly refuse. San Lang was an excellent chopper, and he told him so. It was stew again. In fairness, whenever he tried to make something other than stew, it turned out as stew regardless.

San Lang was standing to assist him when suddenly, a gust of wind blew Xie Lian’s hat right off his head. He heard a tiny thump as it hit San Lang’s hand, which had snapped up in a millisecond to grab it.

He turned his head. San Lang had leant forward to reach the hat, and he was very close.

Xie Lian’s praise for his quick reflexes died in his mouth as he looked up at him. San Lang had such nice eyes. He liked that San Lang looked at him that way, like he was special.

This close, there was a tiny hint of nervousness behind San Lang’s normally confident features, a twitching of his brows, a hesitance behind his eyes and parted lips. There were a few grains of sand on his pale cheek, and Xie Lian itched to brush them off.

It was a very long moment. Xie Lian wouldn’t mind living inside it.

San Lang brought his hand down, and fit the hat back on his head, reaching back to tighten the strap. He found his words, though they were quiet. “There, gege. Now it won’t fly away again.”

Xie Lian didn’t know what to say, except to keep looking up at him. “Thank you, San Lang,” he managed eventually.

The metal pot clinked against the wood, and the moment was broken. “Ah…dinner.”

“Yes, gege.”

“Sit down! You are my guest.”

San Lang’s lips quirked, and he sat. They began eating companionably as a muffled shout came from Feng Xin down on the road: “what do you *MEAN* NO DOORDASH HERE?”

“San Lang…”

“Yes, gege,” he sighed. “Go on.”

“Go on what?”

“Invite them up.”

“I won’t do it if you don’t want me to.”

“I never want you to tiptoe around me. Just be you. I will always respect your decisions.”

Xie Lian felt a warmth in his chest which was almost definitely not acid reflux from the stew.

“Alright, San Lang.”

The dinner was awkward and tense, and Mu Qing threw up quite violently, but Xie Lian felt very satisfied with the day’s events. Even if everything turned to garbage the next day, he’d had two whole perfect days. And in fairness, Xie Lian always found a use for garbage.

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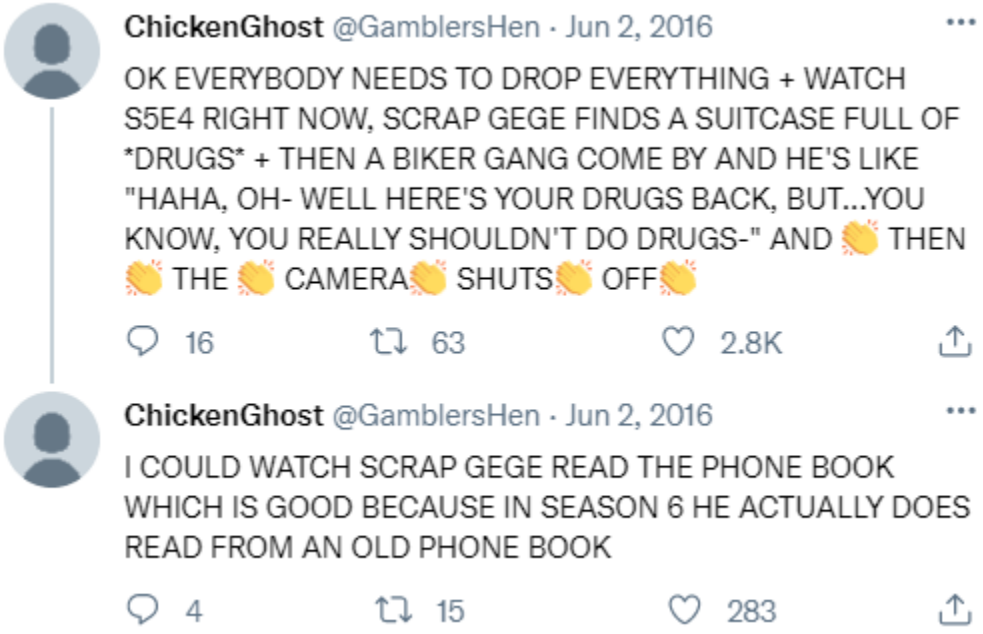

ShakeDiceLikeaPolaroidPicture
@ShakeIt

@GamblersHen I'VE NOW SEEN 3 SEPARATE EPISODES WHERE SCRAP GEGE HAD TO RUN FROM BATS

HOW MANY BATS CAN ONE MAN DODGE

8:08 PM · Jun 2, 2016 · Twitter for HuaPhone

35 Retweets **6** Quote Tweets **214** Likes

GhostTitizen @Horny4Chengzhu · May 29, 2016

THIS SHOW IS HIGH. ART. #SCRAPCOLLECTOR

ChengzhuFanfic @GamblersDom · May 29, 2016

OMG THE EPISODE WHERE HE FINDS THAT STAMP COLLECTION AND HE JUST SAYS "THIS MUST HAVE MEANT SO MUCH TO SOMEONE, ONCE" AND THEN HE PUTS IT IN A BOX MARKED 'PRECIOUS'

HE'S PRECIOUS PROTECT SCRAP GEGE AT ALL COSTS

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Chapter End Notes

Fic is retweetable here if you fancy doing so!

Season 9 Premiere Tonight!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Xie Lian was nervous. San Lang had given him the eye again when he mentioned uploading the files for his first episode via his dodgy USB and an internet cafe.

“Gege. I have military grade satellite equipment. You don’t need to go to an internet cafe, and you don’t need a USB.”

“Oh,” wilted Xie Lian slightly. It had taken him over a year to figure out how to use that USB properly.

“I can handle the uploads. Just make sure you’re happy with the final cut, and we’ll go live tonight.”

“Oh, I’m so happy with it! It’s fantastic!”

“Then consider it sent, gege. 2am tonight, the ninth season premiere.”

He hummed. “Alright then, San Lang.”

He was enjoying the desert. In fact, he was having more fun than he’d ever had in his life. Long days of driving just meant long hours to talk to San Lang. He was becoming unstoppable, frequently pausing to apologise for how much he was blathering. San Lang always just shook his head, amused, and said “Keep talking.”

Xie Lian never realised that he had this much to say to someone.

He and San Lang had driven around a few new businesses on the outskirts of some oasis towns, and filmed in more units. He was unused to having his pick of cuts: if this kept up, he may end up having *too much* material!

Everywhere they went, Ghost Citizens had found a way for them to stay in luxury.

Yurts saw them through the eastern part of the desert. For another few nights, Citizens arranged for fully powered and stocked Airstream trailers. They even had rainwater showers. They always left them snacks and nice notes and, in one case, a woman’s extremely flimsy underwear. Luckily San Lang spotted that straight away and got rid of it, apologising that his fans were so crude.

Xie Lian chuckled. Crude, yes, but still respectful in their own way. They never hung around to hound them or force interactions. They seemed to be more of a community, with San Lang as their leader.

Xie Lian discovered that Ghost Citizens even subscribed to a fan-made code of conduct, which clearly stated that any form of harassment of San Lang or his guests would result in permanent bans. They could be a little overeager, but they toed the line.

He worried a lot at first that they were taking far too much advantage of their kindness. Until he learned from a Citizen at a gas stop that San Lang donated to charities (voted for by the fandom) every time they completed a task successfully. It was like a game. So far, he'd donated $15,000, matched dollar for dollar by Citizens. He apparently did this sort of thing quite often.

Xie Lian teased him about it the entire day. Here was San Lang, acting so imperious and mean to his followers, when in reality...

"You're secretly very kind, aren't you San Lang?"

"Definitely not, gege. I've seen what kindness looks like. I'm far too capricious. And I'm very *un* kind to people I don't like."

"Mhmm. I'm sorry, I can't hear your capricious, unkind words over the cash you're sending to animal shelters and rainbow youth charities, San Lang."

It wasn't completely smooth sailing. Mu Qing and Feng Xin were still following them, and were increasingly irritable due to sleeping in their van. Xie Lian offered to give them his accommodation, but San Lang quickly deadpanned that his legal liability did not cover assclowns, and they refused anyway.

Every time San Lang pointedly asked them when they were leaving, they came up with vague excuses that they were scouting locations for their show. Xie Lian didn't mind so much. It was a little awkward, still, but he had room in heart for both of them.

They pulled into Banyue Storage on a dusty Thursday night. Xie Lian was so enjoying the quirky fan accommodations that he insisted they should just camp overnight again and film in the morning, instead of pushing on elsewhere. It was a late, last minute decision, but it felt right.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin rolled their eyes, but decided to hang around on the side of the road again, eating dry sandwiches that kept getting sand blown into them. Mu Qing didn't appreciate Xie Lian's sand-wich pun, though Feng Xin choked a laugh and then pretended otherwise by glaring at San Lang. They seemed to not want to leave until they were sure his premiere would happen without a hitch, not that they would admit it.

The wind was whipping up tiny sand-tornadoes, dancing will-o-wisps in the empty lot. It was midnight. The show would premiere in only two hours, but the reception still seemed to be open and fully lit. There was a hasty sign taped to the door: LORD CHENGZHU AND SCRAP GEGE PLEASE COME SEE ME.

The young woman behind the desk was quite wide-eyed when they opened the door, the bell tinkling as it swung shut. She had bleached eyebrows, a black mullet and many piercings, and

her tiny frame was artfully swamped in a ragged black dress layered under a leather harness. The office, like her, was miniscule. It was really more of a cupboard.

“You’re really here! The Ghost King!” she breathed. “I’m one of your Citizens! I’m a Savage!”

San Lang raised an eyebrow with interest. “I wouldn’t have expected to meet a Savage all the way out here.”

“I like the quiet here in the desert. And it’s kinda spooky. I like that.”

He glanced at Xie Lian, who was swivelling his head between them. “Oh, Savage is the highest tier of my fan community, gege. They’re fans who are big enough to muster and coordinate the other fans, moderate events, that sort of thing. They usually have pretty decent followings in their own right.”

“I’m big on Twitter,” she shrugged.

“What’s your name, Savage?”

She gestured to the sign. “Banyue.”

Xie Lian noted with interest that it used to say “Banyue ~~and the Desert Soldiers~~ Storage”, but she had crossed that part out. She saw him looking. “Oh…my death metal band. We had a pretty hardcore breakup when I went solo. They were all Savages too, but I won.”

“I see,” he said delicately. “Well…we were hoping-”

“To film? Of course! I’ve already picked out units in case you came, I’ve been hoping all day that you were headed my way! Here you go,” she said, giving them at least ten keys.

“Oh my! So many to choose from.”

“Yeah. And we get a lot of ranchers in these parts so some of those units will be filled with a lot of blades and chains. Spooky as hell. I recommend Unit 24. It’s been abandoned for years, filled with all sorts of creepy stuff. Me and my band used to practice in there for the aesthetic. Called it the Sinner’s Pit.”

“Great,” he said weakly.

San Lang drummed his fingers on the desk. “Is there nothing set up for us?”

Banyue spoke up earnestly. “Oh…there’s a sandstorm forecast. It’s actually going to hit any minute; I’m so glad you made it. I made the decision to use my Savage clout and ban everyone from driving here.”

San Lang nodded, eyes softening. “Fair enough. That was the right decision.”

“Looks like we’ll have to stay here, San Lang.”

Xie Lian adapted well to sudden changes of plan, but San Lang's brows were knit. "I'm sorry, gege. I should have checked the weather."

"It's not your fault! We have your truck, we'll make do!"

"You will not sleep in a vehicle."

Banyue piped up. "I have some units you can use, if you need a place to shelter! There's one that has, well…not beds, exactly, but they're very comfortable, in unit 35."

San Lang sighed. "Is it fit for human habitation?"

"It'll see you through the night. Storm's scheduled to wind down around 2am, actually, just in time for your season premiere!"

"You know about that?!" said Xie Lian, shocked.

"Of course! It's all over Twitter!"

"But I'm not on the Twitter!"

"Neither is our Lord, but it's where we raise his ghost army to do his bidding," she grinned.

San Lang seemed to be internally warring with himself. Xie Lian took pity on him. The first snafu of production, and it was out of San Lang's control.

"San Lang, it's what we have to do. It's fine."

"I promised you comfort."

"I'm not immune to a bit of rough sleeping."

"You shouldn't have to."

"You can't control the weather!"

San Lang grumbled that maybe one day he'd just have to learn how to, then.

"Come on. Let's shelter. It could be fun!"

San Lang sighed. "Alright. I do need to set up so we can watch your premiere anyway."

"Great. Let's just hunker down while you do that."

"Are you going to have a watch party tonight?" Banyue asked hopefully.

"I suppose we could, if you want to stay up! We wouldn't want to keep you," said Xie Lian, hesitant.

"Don't worry! Me and the Citizens are people of the night anyway." She bid them goodbye with a cheery wave. "I'm just going to check all the doors are locked down. I'll come find

you in unit 35 when it's time! And mind the scorpion snakes!"

"The what-"

The wind slammed the door shut, and the outside light flickered and hummed. "Ah…I should warn Mu Qing and Feng Xin."

"I'll come with you, gege."

"Really?" he said dubiously.

"She said any minute, gege. If you get caught in it, you won't be able to find me. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

Xie Lian ignored the interesting twist in his abdomen at the words 'not letting you' and nodded.

The wind was already much stronger. They had to fight their way to the van, and knocked on the window. Feng Xin opened it a crack.

"There's a storm forecast!" yelled Xie Lian.

"No shit!" replied Feng Xin, arm up against the sand already blowing in.

"We're going to shelter in a unit for a bit! It has beds! Come with us?"

Mu Qing and Feng Xin exchanged a look, and shook their heads stubbornly. "No. We can make it to somewhere else."

"Don't drive in this! Come with us, at least you could sleep a little!"

"Is *he* going to be there?"

Xie Lian huffed. "Now isn't the time!"

"Alright, alright," muttered Mu Qing. "Let's go."

They fought their way to unit 35. The wind was chaotic, sand punishing in their eyes. Xie Lian was glad that San Lang refused to let go of his arm; he was right about him getting lost. He couldn't see a thing in the dark with all this sand. San Lang led them along to the right unit, and wrenched the door open.

Xie Lian stumbled inside with San Lang following closely. He turned back to check he had made it, and proceeded to immediately stumble backwards as his calf hit something.

He fell heavily, grabbing at San Lang's shirt as he went down with him. They both hit something pillowy, but with hard enclosed edges, and heard a clatter as everything went dark. The unit door slammed shut.

"Gege-"

“Ooof, agh, ow San Lang, what is-”

“Are you alright?!”

“I don’t-”

“Xie Lian?” called Mu Qing.

“What the hell happened, it’s pitch dark in here-” said Feng Xin.

“Use your phone, get the flashlight-” Mu Qing urged.

“What is that- OW- why are there so many sharp corners, I thought you said these were beds-”

“They’re too low to be beds- here-”

In the melee, Xie Lian was readjusting to the fact that San Lang was sprawled on top of him, face buried in the space next to his. He felt goosebumps erupt at the nape of his neck as San Lang’s breath stirred at the downy hairs. He could feel his mouth moving by his ear.

“Gege, I’m sorry, there’s something above me, I can’t move-”

Mu Qing’s voice was odd. “Um, you guys are in a coffin.”

Silence.

“A what?!”

Their voices were muffled above them.

“The lid’s fallen down, shit-”

“These aren’t beds, Xie Lian, there are like…ten, plushy empty coffins in here.”

Xie Lian heard scraping as Mu Qing and Feng Xin scrabbled at the lid above them. But again, all his senses were tuned to San Lang’s breathing, and the twitching of his fingers down by his hips, and how warm and heavy and firm he was-

“Fuck, it’s really heavy and another lid fell across it- hold on guys, we’re going to have to sort this out-”

“Okay!” he squeaked.

San Lang’s voice was quiet. “I really am sorry gege, did I hurt you?”

Xie Lian found himself clenching his fists at the feeling of San Lang’s voice vibrating by his neck, his hair tickling at his cheek. He smelt amazing, like spice and soap and musk and a little salt and sweat from the day.

He realised with horror that he was aroused. Extremely aroused. He'd never had anyone weighing him down like this before. His legs were tangled between San Lang's and they couldn't move at all, oh *no*, what if San Lang felt him-

Come to think of it, what felt like San Lang's bulky satellite phone was also digging into him, so perhaps he could hold out hope that San Lang would mistake it for something else?

He let out an involuntary gasp as San Lang briefly moved his leg, and San Lang's fingers twitched again. His chest was heaving, expanding against San Lang's ribcage with each breath, they were so crushed together that if San Lang raised his head there would be no space between their faces at all-

Light, and air.

"What the fuck-"

San Lang was hauled off him roughly. "Get your hands off me," he snarled, shoving Mu Qing.

"I was helping you, you *dick-"*

Feng Xin offered Xie Lian a sheepish hand, which he took and heaved himself up. The torchlight from Feng Xin's phone threw shadows everywhere, but they were right. They were in a unit stuffed with coffins, their lids stacked against the walls. Fairly comfortable coffins, but still. Xie Lian now understood why Banyue only called them 'sort of' beds.

The wind howled outside, as if reminding them they had no other choice.

Xie Lian was the only one who seemed to find it funny. He happily sat in the coffin as Feng Xin and Mu Qing refused to get in one. They stood and looked at the door mournfully as it rattled in the storm. Xie Lian fished out his old army flashlight that he'd found in a unit years ago, partially as a distraction, and used it as a lantern.

San Lang ignored them entirely, picking the coffin next to him to sit in and taking out his satellite modem and laptop to work. Xie Lian watched him. He was very serious and chewed at his lip sometimes when he was working. Xie Lian found himself staring as his teeth pulled at the delicate skin, until he realised he really shouldn't. Especially after they'd been in such an indecent position. He didn't want to make San Lang uncomfortable.

Their eyes met, and Xie Lian blushed instantly. That wouldn't do.

So he hid, and took a nap.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin definitely judged him for doing so, but the coffins were actually quite comfortable. The silk cushioning was far more luxurious than most beds he'd been in for the last ten years as a fully alive person. His remark along those lines made San Lang's mouth do the tightening thing.

He made San Lang promise to shake him awake for the premiere, but Mu Qing and Feng Xin's hissed arguments woke him up shortly before anyway.

“Storm’s done. It sounds quiet out there, I need to check on my van.”

“*Your* van? It’s the *show’s* van.”

“I do more work than you fucking do, so it’s my van-”

“What?! *I* work harder than you-”

“And yet, your scripts are garbage-”

Xie Lian sat up, rubbing his eyes.

“Get out,” spat San Lang, surging up to kick the door open. “You woke him up.”

Feng Xin stomped out into the night. “Fine.”

“It could just be a moment of calm, Mu Qing, be careful,” cautioned Xie Lian.

Mu Qing looked between the door and San Lang, seeming torn on who he hated more. He followed Feng Xin.

“We’ll come back.”

San Lang rolled his eyes. “If I find your bodies in the morning, I’m leaving them for the vultures.”

Only a few seconds later, a soft knock came at the door.

San Lang’s nostrils flared, wrenching it open with a “Make up your mind- oh.”

It was Banyue, with a bowl of popcorn and a jar of pickles. “Hi!”

Xie Lian waved from his coffin. “Come on in!”

“Oh, excellent choice, solid oak with the silk lining. You have good taste!”

“Thank you!”

Banyue picked the black velvet lined coffin ("It's my favourite!") and as they settled to watch the premiere, the thin iron walls rattled.

"Ah," she said, eyes up. "The storm still wants a final moment. The desert is so dramatic."

"Oh dear," said Xie Lian. "I suppose they'll have to shelter in the truck..."

"Who?" said Banyue, munching popcorn.

"Our unpaid interns," said San Lang quickly. "Tell me Banyue, *are* there vultures out here?"

"Oh sure, we have all kinds of flesh eating birds!"

"Excellent."

"San Lang," warned Xie Lian fondly. He sighed. "Let's watch. They'll be alright."

The show began. Xie Lian always found it very uncomfortable to watch himself, so he spent the entire half hour praising San Lang for his lighting and camera work. Banyue happily agreed.

“It’s definitely improved, I saw some old episodes and it looked like the Blair Witch Project. Not that that wasn’t metal of you, Scrap-gege. It was definitely a vibe.”

Xie Lian had no idea what she was talking about, but accepted the compliment.

As soon as the episode finished, San Lang raised his fingers to his earpiece. A call. “Yes. What do you have for me?”

Xie Lian twiddled his thumbs a little as San Lang said “Mmm. Right. I understand.”

San Lang smiled widely, and ended the call. He turned to Xie Lian.

“I have some good news, gege.”

“You do?”

“One of your studio’s social media staff is a fan of mine. She stayed up to check the network numbers. You just had forty five million people watch your premiere.”

Xie Lian’s jaw dropped.

“Forty…forty five *million?”*

“Mhmm.”

“That’s so great!” said Banyue, clapping her hands together. “All my Malices really came through! Though I bet Ke Mo didn’t watch, just out of spite. Little bitch is still mad I took his bass.”

San Lang inclined his head, eyes moving rapidly as he checked his phone. “It’s not eighty, but we’re going to get there by the season finale.”

Xie Lian was absolutely dumbfounded. “Forty five million. Are…are you sure? It’s not…not just forty five thousand? Or just…forty five? Forty five is usually a pretty good day!”

“It’s forty five million gege. Of course.”

Xie Lian shook his head in wonder. “This is incredible.”

San Lang shrugged with a lopsided smile. “You’re incredible, gege.”

He held his gaze. Xie Lian felt very warm in his chest. But in fairness, he always felt that way when San Lang held his gaze.

He let out an awed breath. “I…I never thought this would happen.”

“I told you it would, gege. Of course people love your show, now that they've seen it.”

“But millions of people, San Lang? *Millions of people*, watching me play with my junk at 2am?”

San Lang’s eyes widened.

“I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love playing with my junk, and I’m always so happy to find new ways to have fun with it, but that’s unbelievable.”

Banyue coughed. “Um, I think you’d have reached millions a lot quicker if you-”

“Have a look at this, gege,” interrupted San Lang quickly, voice oddly strangled. He handed him his phone, which Xie Lian took gingerly.

Tweet after tweet with tens of thousands of likes talking about his show, photos of watch parties… some people were even dressing up like him. #ScrapCollector was trending worldwide, and there were already quite a few threads raging for international fans trading pirated links.

Xie Lian was quiet. This was remarkable. But…

San Lang’s smile faltered. “Gege…you don’t like it?”

“It’s not that,” he said carefully.

“What is it?”

Xie Lian sighed. “These…these are all your followers. But they’re watching my show.”

San Lang frowned. “Not just my followers. But a lot of them, yes.”

“But…you don’t want to be on camera? You weren’t in this episode at all. Shouldn’t you…I don’t know, introduce the show, or be in it? Your followers will want to see you.”

San Lang’s face changed, into something resolute. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because it is *your* show. Some are my followers, true. But now they’re yours too. They like your show for what it is. It’s *yours*, it’s not about me. I won’t let it be about me.”

“I…I just feel like I should give them what they want, if they’re your fans.”

“Creating content for what you think people want instead of what *you* want is a slippery slope, gege. And as a fan myself, I promise you: there is nothing I would change about you-your show. I only want to make the production easier.”

Xie Lian nodded, chewing at his lip.

“And gege…they’re your fans now. People can be fans of more than one person.”

Xie Lian shook his head, amazed as tweet after tweet poured in.

“I don’t even know what to do with all of this. It’s so many people, and they’re all saying such nice things. Here, this one here says they’re thirsty for me and they want to suck me dry! Haha, it’s so nice that they think of me as a refreshing drink.”

“Um-” said Banyue.

“Yes, gege. Very nice of them,” said San Lang swiftly, fingers balling into fists as his eyes flicked up and down him briefly. He shut his eyes and swallowed heavily.

“I hope they like the next episodes, but…”

“But?”

Xie Lian was very well acquainted with flashes in the pan, and he recognised the signs. To hang on until the final episode in six weeks time, to maintain popularity, would be difficult. And if he wasn’t careful, these numbers could become his whole focus. He could already feel the pull of it, the need to read every tweet, to drink in the praise…

Scrolling the tweets, he made a decision.

He handed San Lang’s phone back, patting the back of his hand.

“Don’t tell me.”

San Lang blinked. “Eh?”

“Don’t tell me the numbers anymore. Or show me the tweetings. Only tell me after the final episode. You’re right; I don’t want to focus on the wrong thing. I really was given such a nice gift all these years: no one cared, so I was only making what I wanted. It was quite joyful, actually. I can’t let myself get sucked into other people’s opinions about this. I just want to do my best, and go out on my terms.”

San Lang’s smile was slow, and gentle, like he was watching a treasured moment play out.

“Of course, gege. No more numbers. Let’s just make the show.”

“And have fun!” insisted Xie Lian.

“And have fun,” agreed San Lang, nodding indulgently.

“TV should be fun after all. And I want to have fun until the end.”

“Good. I will try to ensure that happens.”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about that, San Lang. I’m always having fun when I’m with you!” laughed Xie Lian, before stopping.

San Lang's throat bobbed as he looked at him, and silence descended in the void of the witty comeback Xie Lian had expected from him. Perhaps Xie Lian had gone a little too far like he always did, but it was true. He really did always have so much fun with San Lang.

Xie Lian exhaled. Best to change the subject. Luckily, Banyue did it for him.

"I know what you mean, Xie Lian."

"You do?" he said curiously.

"Uh huh. Actually, um- this is a little embarrassing, but- when I was a teenager, I was a huge fan of *Flower Crowned Prince!* But um, no offence, I mainly watched it for those two guys on it, Mu Qing and Feng Xin? They just had the craziest hatefuck chemistry I've ever seen, you know?"

"..."

"So I wrote fanfiction about them. It was pretty popular at first. But I kept on writing it waaaay after they were on the show. Like…years. Eventually, I only had one reader. But I still liked writing it, you know? It was worth more than all the clout of the early years, to just enjoy something for the sake of it. Even just to write for myself and the only other person out there as feral as me."

"..."

San Lang cleared his throat. "I would like for you to send me those works, please. It's very, *very* important that I see them, and am able to share the links with…anyone I please."

"San Lang-"

"Sure thing! I'll airdrop you," she said, already tapping on her phone. "It's quiet out there now. I should get outside you know, see if the sand has damaged anything."

"We'll help you," said Xie Lian firmly. It was the least they could do.

"Naw, I'm alright! Trust me, it would take a lot more than a sandstorm to kill me."

"We insist."

They helped Banyue check over the lockers. Then Xie Lian held the flashlight as San Lang helped her dig her car tires out of the sand mounds that had built up around them.

"Is that your interns' van? How many of them are in there? Should we check on them-"

"No," said Xie Lian swiftly. "They're…um, shy. It's best you don't meet them."

The van was quiet. They must have finally fallen asleep. They usually got quite tuckered out after their fights, like toddlers.

"Okay…"

Xie Lian yawned. San Lang noticed. “Gege, get in the car. I’ll drive you somewhere to a hotel.”

“There aren’t any within 200 miles with night receptions,” said Banyue, watching the stars and crunching on a pickle. “I’m sleeping in the office, myself.”

San Lang sighed, tense again. Xie Lian drew himself up. San Lang was worried he was doing a bad job. He couldn’t let him think that.

“Banyue, do you have any empty units?”

“I thought the coffins were comfy?”

“Oh! Um, sure, they were, but I prefer a uh…simpler sleeping arrangement.”

She shrugged. “Sure. Units 80-90 are all vacant.” She fished around for some keys.

San Lang raised an eyebrow. “An empty unit?”

“I have a mat, and a sleeping bag I can unzip into a blanket.”

“You’re sure?”

“It’s 3am, San Lang! It’ll only be for a few hours. Let’s get some rest.”

San Lang’s face went careful. “Both of us?”

Xie Lian also schooled his face. “Ah…true. It’ll be a bit cramped, if you’d rather sleep in the truck-”

“I’m not leaving you alone out here.”

“That’s fair, the scorpion snakes,” nodded Banyue vaguely.

Xie Lian realised what he had just got them both into, and tried to not blush about it. “Well. Both of us then.”

They bid Banyue goodnight, and opened the unit silently. Xie Lian shook the dust out from his thin mat as best he could. “It’s not much-”

“It’s good, gege. Very good.”

They crawled onto it. Xie Lian had never slept next to anyone before on his mat, so he really had no understanding of just how cramped it actually was once there were two people on it. It wasn’t wide enough, but the alternative was cold concrete.

There was simply no way to avoid awkwardness. On his back, their shoulders were squished together. If he curled towards him, their faces would be two inches apart.

He busied himself with arranging the sleeping bag blanket instead. “Are you warm enough, San Lang?”

The tendons in his neck seemed very tense. “I’ll be fine, gege.”

“Bigger than the coffin, at least!” he attempted.

San Lang was quite subdued. Some sand must have got into his throat, because his voice was hoarse. “Yes. It is bigger than the coffin.”

“Okay. Just endure it, San Lang. It won’t be long until morning. Wake me up if I oversleep.”

“As you wish, gege,” he murmured quietly in the dark.

Xie Lian shouldn’t have brought up the coffin. Or about how they were only marginally less crushed together now. He would close his eyes and turn away from him on his side and not breathe in San Lang’s warm, close scent and just not think *at all*, because his thoughts were traitors.

San Lang turned on his side too, behind him. It opened up just enough room for them to not technically be touching, by a hair’s breadth. Which was for the best. Because they were colleagues.

Xie Lian squeezed his eyes even more firmly shut, and murmured “Good night, San Lang.”

“Sleep well, gege.”

Xie Lian refused to admit how long he remained awake.

***

BrocadeImmortal @MurderSack · Jun 3, 2016

IS IT JUST ME OR WAS SCRAP GEGE *GLOWING*? OUR LORD GAVE HIM GOOD LIGHTING FINALLY BUT HE LOOKS SO HAPPY TOO

17 2 26

GhostTitizen @GamblersDom · Jun 3, 2016

OMG RIGHT? HE'S SO FREAKING CUTE AND HAD SUCH A BIG SMILE ON HIS FACE EVERY TIME HE LOOKED BEHIND THE CAMERA, OUR LORD MUST BE BEING SO NICE TO HIM!

3 2 13

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

MALICE MOB: AS YOU MAY KNOW, I HOSTED SCRAP GEGE AND OUR LORD LAST NIGHT! THEY ARE THE BEST. SCRAP GEGE IS VERY SWEET AND KIND. SO I NEED YOU ALL TO DOUBLE DOWN ON YOUR SOURCES. WE NEED TO SOLVE THIS THING.

2:45 PM · Jun 3, 2016

315 Retweets **124** Quote Tweets **1.4K** Likes

***

Chapter End Notes

Fic is retweetable here if you fancy doing so!

There is also AMAZING fan art of San Lang filming Xie Lian happily showing off his junk here by Ghost Citizen broship_addict! Don't worry, it's SFW 😂

Mount Tonglu Storage Solutions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

ButcherZhu
@ThighMeat

"Unpredictable" by @BiteyFetusGhost

Tonight, I wonder

What this episode will bring

Perchance some prizes

Mayhap money, garish gems?

Ah. More bats. Of course.

Someone protect this gege

He deserves the world.

2:08 PM · Jul 19, 2016 · Twitter for Chengzhu

475 Retweets **94** Quote Tweets **2.9K** Likes

ButcherZhu
@ThighMeat

“Fealty and Frailty” by @BoneDragon

Shiny haired and bright

He wanders through scrap-wonders

Worthless and priceless

From prince to pauper, he is

Stout, stalwart, steadfast

Strong as steel, in his softness.

2:10 PM · Jul 19, 2016 · Twitter for Chengzhu

203 Retweets **51** Quote Tweets **7K** Likes

ButcherZhu @ThighMeat · Jul 19, 2016

"Pure" (1/2) by @ReverendofEmptyProse

Dear Season Two-Ge

I'm quite sure that powder was

Not baking soda

Did you not wonder why you

Became so giddy

And talked at the speed of light

ButcherZhu @ThighMeat · Jul 19, 2016

"Pure" (2/2) by @ReverendofEmptyProse

And while we're at it

Those were not chew toys for dogs

Look close at the shape...

That whole unit, Scrap Gege

Even a sex swing

But...you had fun in it, so

Please, no one tell him.

204 531 7.2K

***

Xie Lian, unfortunately, was playing host to an unexpected entourage.

“I had never heard of your show until He Xuan told me! It’s so great that it’s doing so well!” said Shi Qingxuan, peering affably around the carpark.

Xie Lian squinted at them in confusion. “Wait…He Xuan, the IT guy?”

“Yes! My best friend!”

“Your best friend is the IT guy?”

“Yes, He Xuan is my best friend!”

Xie Lian didn’t know what to tell them.

“Well…there’s really not much to ‘check out,’ as you say. We drive, we film, each unit usually takes no more than an hour. Honestly, most of the time is driving.”

Shi Qingxuan frowned. “But what about hair and makeup?”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “Um, no hair and makeup. Well, I mean… I try to brush my hair, you know, if I can.”

“Scripts?”

“I don’t script, I just…um, talk. Ramble, really.”

“Set dressing?”

“Well, sometimes I try to make sure there’s nothing sharp or poisonous or alive or illegal before I start but that often doesn’t work out…I prefer to preserve the mystery anyway! It’s more authentic.”

“B-roll?”

“Um, I just say the name of the business at the start. No B-roll. It’s all one take, just me exploring what I find in the unit.”

“Incredible! That’s so incredible, Xie Lian! I mean, you’ve found the formula for reality TV magic, even though millions of people are basically watching paint dry? Astonishing.”

“Ah…well, yes, thank you.”

San Lang was standing with his arms crossed, looking extremely displeased as Shi Wudu directed various production assistants to unload their gigantic travel bus. Emblazoned on the side was a screenprint of Shi Qingxuan flirtatiously winking behind their signature fan.

“Exactly how long were you and your…um, group going to be here, Shi Qingxuan?”

“Oh, well I make a point of supporting all my studiomates, even though we’re in competition. I apologise, I really had no idea you even existed! And now that I’ve found out it’s between you and me for Golden Lantern this year- I said to my brother we absolutely HAVE to go down to the desert - write it off as location scouting- and see what’s what!”

“I understand,” smiled Xie Lian peaceably. “But…we’re not in the desert.”

“Yes! It was very annoying to find out that you just *moved on*, don’t you have a location schedule?”

“Nope.”

Ling Wen was coming too. This afternoon, with the case containing the Golden Lantern trophy for whoever’s season finale won the most viewers: *Wind Master* at 8.30 primetime, and *Scrap Collector* at 2am. Xie Lian had been most surprised to receive the call; but then again, no other show had been even close to beating *Wind Master* in any year since its inception.

Shi Qingxuan was being very gracious about it. Shi Wudu less so. Xie Lian’s weak pleas that he really didn’t want to be in the running for the Lantern or…anything, really, were ignored.

Shi Wudu sighed, now watching the bus attempt to reverse out of the tiny carpark, failing miserably. “Is this all the room there is?"

"Yes," said San Lang, inspecting his nails.

"Isn't it a bit unprofessional to only finish filming on the day of your finale?"

"No."

"Where's your hotel?"

"There are no hotels nearby. And my showrunner prefers to avoid motels."

"Why?" he demanded.

"I like a place with a little more heart!" called Xie Lian.

"How are we supposed to set up for Shi Qingxuan's Instagram shots without a decent backdrop? We can't take the photos in a tiny *carpark,* there's barely even space for their wind machine! *"*

San Lang's nostrils flared. "Oh! I'm terribly sorry, we should have made more room for you on this bandwagon."

Xie Lian disguised his snort as a coughing fit.

Shi Wudu raised an imperious eyebrow. "I'm in charge of budgets, you know."

"Yes, obviously. Very kind of the CFO to come by to spy- I mean, to *support*, our show."

"It was Shi Qingxuan's idea, not mine. But Jun Wu is willing to reassess the budget if your show exceeds your viewership goal and gets a new contact."

"Wow. So magnanimous of him to show such generosity, especially given it would be legally required for him to do so."

Shi Wudu's brows knit.

"And anyway, you can't take any photos with us," finished San Lang.

"Why?!"

"We don't have promo rights."

Xie Lian smiled at San Lang, grateful. Sure, that was one reason, but he also just didn't want to, and San Lang knew that. San Lang gave him the shadow of a wink.

"No promo?! How on earth do you have so many viewers?"

"If people like something, they'll promo for you."

"People don't know what they want," scoffed Shi Wudu. "Money talks."

"I'm unsure as to why you think we're having a debate? I don't care what you think, at all."

A brief feeling of panic clawed at Xie Lian's throat, watching San Lang be mean and rude to everyone from the Capital. He would miss this so much.

It had been such a mad rush to finally finish everything and decide what to put in the final episode. Mainly because Xie Lian had been very unwilling to stop filming until the last possible moment. And instead of finishing their final take at their final location with any fanfare, they instead heard the gigantic engine of Shi Qingxuan's bus stalling as it pulled up and tried to park.

It seemed they would not be watching the finale alone, just the two of them, like he'd wanted.

Xie Lian couldn't remember when time had mushed together in such a satisfying way. It had been a month, and he had kept waiting for a bad day. When San Lang would be tired, or irritable, or sick of him. Xie Lian knew he could be a little much. San Lang never seemed to care. He had always been his usual self, driving confidently, setting up, following his instructions, bantering cheekily.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin had left after the first episode premiere, forced back by shooting schedules. The conversation had been short, and awkward.

"I hope you know what you're doing with him. I still think he's shady," said Mu Qing, loading up their van.

"He's my kind of shady, Mu Qing."

"Well," he grumbled. "Just…don't give him too much power, you know."

"Power? Over my one-man storage unit show? There's not a lot of power to grab there, Mu Qing."

"Well. Anyway."

"Mu Qing."

"What?"

"Why did you help me? You know what your contract says. I won't tell anyone from the Capital you were here, but …you know you're not supposed to talk to me."

Mu Qing's eyes widened, hand lingering on the van doors. "I- I don't…" he took a breath, and let it out slowly. "You know…you were impossible to find, all those years."

"Eh?"

"You weren't in contact with the Capital. You just wandered around without a plan. And when you weren't filming, no one knew what you were doing."

Xie Lian shrugged. "It's nothing special. I worked, wherever I could find work. Harvesting, busking, fruit picking, whatever I could find outside cities."

“Why?”

“I just like to keep moving.”

Mu Qing exhaled through his nose. “We didn’t think you’d want to see us. But then when we saw you in the office, you were the same as you always were.”

“It’s true. I’m reliable like that.”

“How are you the *same?”* he said suddenly, facing the van with his fists clenched. “How could you be, after everything?”

Ah. Xie Lian understood now. They had to come and see for themselves.

Xie Lian bit his cheek. “I couldn’t let it take who I am, on top of everything I had.”

Mu Qing looked down. “I don’t understand how you haven’t…haven’t yelled at us, told us to go fuck ourselves, punched us…anything. Especially me.”

Xie Lian cocked his head. “Oh. Is that what you wanted from me?”

Mu Qing blew out an exasperated breath. “Maybe,” he said, shaking his head. He looked over at Feng Xin, who was sitting with his arms folded in the van, pretending not to eavesdrop.

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “He won’t say goodbye, you know. He feels more guilty than I do. He still thinks he shouldn’t have left.”

Xie Lian laughed. “Oh? And you don’t feel that way, even though you’ve also been sleeping in a van in the desert?”

Mu Qing’s jaw clenched defiantly. “I didn’t have the same opportunities you two did. It was a miracle anyone gave me a job. I- I still don’t even have my high school diploma…My mom was sick. You know that. I had no choice. We didn’t know what was going to…”

Xie Lian patted his arm. “Neither of you had a choice. I really have let it go. Maybe you should too.”

Mu Qing looked at him strangely. “I…I do hope you get to eighty million. It would be…fun, to watch Jun Wu give you the Golden Lantern this year.”

Xie Lian smiled. “Thank you, Mu Qing, but I really don’t give a flying fudge about that sort of thing.” He called to the van. “And thank you too, Feng Xin!”

Feng Xin shrunk down in his seat.

Mu Qing squared himself, and walked away, sparing a final dirty look for San Lang, who was lazing in an old pool chair they’d found, drinking a fruity cocktail in his ripped black jeans and dark sunglasses.

“Finally leaving then?” he called.

“Yeah,” grunted Mu Qing.

“Good. Don’t come back. But…hey, take the 81 north, it’s faster. Apparently there’s a wreck on the normal route today.”

Mu Qing blinked at him. “Okay…thanks.”

“Whatever.”

Xie Lian watched them drive away, waving. “That was nice of you to tell them about the wreck, San Lang.”

“There is no wreck, gege,” said San Lang, unfolding a newspaper from March 1981.

Xie Lian put his hands on his hips. “You are really too mischievous.”

“I think I’m just the right amount,” he said, noisily sipping from his swirly straw.

Xie Lian had to hide his grin, because if he smiled exactly as much as he wanted to these days, he'd never stop.

From that point on, it had just been them for weeks. San Lang remained the consummate jack of all trades professional. Xie Lian worked hard too.

They moved from the desert to the southeast, to sandy beaches and marshy swamps. Swamp town storage units were absurdly good material, filled with absolutely ludicrous finds. One unit had four entire boxes full of taxidermied alligator heads wearing bonnets. Xie Lian jump-scared himself several times on camera, and San Lang had to double over and walk outside to avoid laughing aloud as he filmed.

He saw San Lang getting phone calls after his second, third, fourth and fifth episodes, but he wasn’t a gambling lord for no reason; his poker face was impenetrable. Xie Lian wouldn’t be able to guess what their viewer numbers were if he wanted to. Luckily, he *didn’t* want to. He was curious, but far more interested in just continuing his days with San Lang.

Only after the third episode premiered did he realise: San Lang was going to leave when this was over.

Even if some miracle occurred and *Scrap Collector* got another season, San Lang had a whole empire to run. He wouldn’t want to keep driving around aimlessly with him, living on diner food and gas station coffee. He knew he was keeping San Lang from a much more glamorous and interesting life. It’s just that this unglamorous life was the best thing Xie Lian had ever had.

Xie Lian knew what his own life would go back to, once San Lang went. He’d been doing so well all these years, never letting anything get him down, which was surprisingly easy to do back when nothing good really happened. It was, if nothing else, consistent.

Now, the predictable tides of his bad luck had been thrown completely off. San Lang was just too big a shift in gravity, and the thought of going back to his life from before was starting to terrify him.

He didn't mention it. Every time he felt like he should, his throat got stuck.

San Lang also never said anything. He'd just say: "where to next, gege?"

Then Xie Lian would get distracted and he'd just pick somewhere far away on the map, so he'd have an excuse to let his gaze linger for a little while on San Lang's forearms as he drove, and his rakish smiles whenever Xie Lian said something he found amusing.

He didn't let himself analyse it. Each moment felt too precious, and yet too fleeting all at the same time. To add more hope to it, more emotion, more *need* was just something he couldn't handle. He'd let himself have the immediate moment, and long for nothing beyond it. No daydreams permitted.

And now, they were hours from potentially the last episode ever.

After the very strange experience of watching the *Wind Master* finale, with its epic budget and production values and biggest possible advertisers, he and San Lang decided to hide from Shi Qingxuan's entourage in a converted VW bus a fan had lent them for this leg of the shoot. They were required to go to a celebratory dinner soon, but Xie Lian wanted to steal every moment he could get.

The bus was quirky and fun. There was a perfect alcove with a dining table for two. Xie Lian wouldn't mind living full time in a bus like this, travelling around. What would it be like to travel just for fun? Not to worry about food, or shelter?

He shook himself. Present moment.

"You're quiet, gege."

He smiled. "I know."

"Nervous?"

"A little. It's a lot of expectation."

San Lang nodded. "Well. If you want me to distract you, I can. If you just want some silence, then tell me to go away."

Xie Lian shook his head fondly. "Distract me."

San Lang tapped his chin, thinking. He smiled slowly.

"How about I teach you that dice technique?"

Xie Lian laughed. "The 'proper' way to throw dice?"

“Absolutely.”

“Oh, go on. I’ll embarrass myself when I go on your show otherwise.”

San Lang hadn't mentioned him coming on his show since their first day, but he needed to bring it up. It felt like a life raft; the concept of a future that still had San Lang in it.

San Lang’s lips quirked, and he watched him under his lashes. “Done. And nothing about you would ever embarrass me, gege.”

Xie Lian raised his eyebrows. “I wouldn’t throw down that sort of challenge, if I were you. I’ve done things that would embarrass the most thick faced person in the world.”

“Luckily, I *am* the most thick faced person in the world, so you can test me all you want,” he replied smoothly. He rose and moved around the bus, looking in the kitchen cabinets for a suitable cup. Xie Lian felt his ears warm as his black t-shirt snaked up around his narrow waist and hips.

He returned with a coffee mug, and unveiled an obsidian set of dice from a velvet pouch in his bags. “The mug will have to do, gege.”

“Is there any trick to the dice?”

“No. It’s all in the hands.”

He outstretched his own, and Xie Lian gulped. He placed his hands in his gingerly, noting that they were immediately swallowed up in San Lang’s palms, and tried to remain calm as San Lang maneuvered his fingers to cover the mouth of the mug, and the base at the other end. He cupped each of his hands, and squeezed.

“Now shake, gege.”

“Just…just shake?”

“Mmm.”

Xie Lian obeyed, side to side.

“Try up and down.”

Xie Lian grimaced, and complied.

“That’s a little too…jerky, gege. Make it smooth.”

San Lang’s hands were surprisingly cool, trapping his against the mug. They were firm, and slender. Sculptor’s hands, he reminded himself.

“Is this how you sculpt too?” he said, feeling that unless he made conversation he would burst into flames.

San Lang smiled, eyes fixed and dark. “That’s all about making it smooth, too. Sculpting and dice rolling are both very sensual, gege. Or at least…that’s how it makes me feel, when I do it.”

“Oh, right,” gasped Xie Lian, attempting to ignore how sensual it was making him feel also. “What’s your sculpting documentary called, again?”

“The Kiln, gege.”

“Flergh,” he mumbled nonsensically, hands still trapped in place.

“Let’s see what we have, shall we? Show me, gege.”

Xie Lian bit his lip, and let the dice fall from the mug.

A four and a five. “Not bad!” he said, pleased.

San Lang crooked an eyebrow. “Hmm. We can do a little better.”

“Okay,” said Xie Lian again, nodding far too many times.

They tried again. This time, San Lang encouraged an almost circular movement, not stopping until Xie Lian could feel the movement of the dice hitting the sides of the cup regularly and predictably. San Lang’s hands held his even more tightly this time.

“Ready gege? Show it to me again.”

“Yes,” he breathed.

A double six.

His mouth fell open. “Wow! I don’t…how is that…”

“I told you.”

Xie Lian blinked at him, biting at his lip. “Um…maybe one more round? To really cement it?”

San Lang’s lazy smiles were really quite dangerous. He reached for his hands-

“Xie Lian, where is good for the dinner around here? I can only see places that don’t even have reviews on Google!” complained Shi Qingxuan, rapping on the door.

San Lang’s fingers twitched, and he reluctantly retracted them.

“Oh, um, just a moment, I’ll be out in a second!” said Xie Lian, voice higher pitched than he would like.

He stared at the table. “We should be good hosts.”

San Lang gave a thin smile. “If you say so, gege.”

“I don’t really want to go either, San Lang. But it was nice of them to come all the way here to support us.”

San Lang paused hesitantly.

“Speak your mind, San Lang.”

“It’s just…are you sure that’s what they’re here for, gege?”

“Oh no, not at all. I’m sure Jun Wu asked them to come and spy. When Mu Qing and Feng Xin went back with nothing to say, it must have really ground his gears.”

“Nothing goes past you, does it?”

“I’m silly, not stupid.”

“I don’t think you’re either of those things.”

“Why not? I put effort into being silly. It’s fun.”

“Oh?” said San Lang, eyes fond.

“Mhmm. Being silly makes the world a lot easier to take, sometimes.”

San Lang opened his mouth, and closed it again. “All I want is to make it easier for you to take, gege,” he said, voice serious.

Xie Lian peered at him. “You do,” he said shyly.

He nodded firmly. “Good.”

“But that’s not why I like you.”

He stilled. “It isn’t?”

Xie Lian squared his shoulders. “No. I…don’t want you thinking I only like you for what you do for me. I like you because you’re wonderful.”

San Lang wasn’t meeting his eyes. His face was frozen. “I…”

Xie Lian chewed at his lip. “I’m sorry,” he blurted. “I shouldn’t have…that was inappropriate.”

“Gege…after tonight, I need to-”

“We should go! The dinner, haha…”

He fled. He just couldn’t listen to San Lang telling him he had to leave. Not yet.

***

Later on, San Lang started to look a little strange. He was flushed as they came back from dinner, but insisted he was fine when Xie Lian asked. It was midnight, and they had two more hours until the finale. Shi Wudu was complaining that he needed to sleep before their "absurd air time", and Xie Lian thoughtlessly gave up his bus to him.

“I’ll sleep on San Lang’s floor, or one of the units. Right, San Lang?” he said over his shoulder.

He did a double take. San Lang was looking pale, and clammy.

“Oh, we couldn’t possibly!” said Shi Qingxuan.

“Sure we can,” scowled Shi Wudu. “Just take it, he’s used to sleeping on the floor anyway.”

San Lang opened his mouth furiously, but Xie Lian intercepted him and guided him to his bus by the elbow with a throwaway “have a good nap!” over his shoulder.

“You’re sick,” he accused, once they were out of earshot.

“No I’m not, gege. I don’t get sick.”

“You have a fever. I can tell just looking at you.”

“Xie Lian, what’s the name of this place again?” called Shi Qingxuan, head sticking out of their bus.

“Mount Tonglu Storage Solutions,” he replied impatiently. “San Lang, you’re feverish.”

“I just need to sleep it off, gege.”

“I’m not leaving you alone if you’re feverish. What if you get worse?”

“I’ll die, become a ghost, and haunt you.”

“Very funny. In you go,” he ordered. “Straight to bed with you.”

San Lang meekly trudged up the stairs into the bus, and stood awkwardly facing him, head angled as it brushed against the low ceiling.

“I don’t want to get you sick, gege.”

“I never get sick, San Lang. I have an incredible immune tolerance after so many fights with possums.”

He sat heavily on the bed, looking forlorn. He was almost pouting slightly. Xie Lian refrained from the urge to pinch his cheek.

San Lang swayed slightly.

“Lie down!”

“Mmm,” he said, sitting up.

Xie Lian knelt.

“Gege-”

“No boots or socks in bed.”

San Lang coughed. “Okay.”

Xie Lian took off his shoes and socks. He hesitated. Black jeans in bed were unlikely to be comfortable either, especially with a fever, but-

“I can take my clothes off gege, unless you’d like to help me with that too.”

“I- ah-”

Silly San Lang, not in his right mind. Xie Lian stood rapidly and turned around. He heard the resulting rustles and the sound of clothes hitting the floor.

“M’ fine, gege.”

He turned back around trepidatiously, and swallowed. San Lang was no longer wearing a shirt. And his jeans were on the floor. The sheets were pulled up to his shoulders, but still.

“Sorry gege. Feel hot.”

“Hey,” he said gently, sitting on the bed. “Don’t worry, it’s fine.”

“Usually sleep naked, so…”

“...”

Xie Lian refused to let his thoughts wander. He needed to take care of San Lang. He felt his forehead with the back of his palm.

“You’re burning up, San Lang-”

“M’fine.”

“This isn’t good! I should take you to a doctor.”

“Want to sleep,” he whined. “Just need a quick nap. Have to do something important tonight.”

“Hmm,” he wavered, torn. The finale was hardly more important than his health. “Let me get you some cold compresses.”

He hurried around the van, wetting towels and old t-shirts with cold water and placing them on San Lang’s head and neck.

“Mmm. Feels nice,” he said, splayed out in the bed with his eyes closed.

“Okay. If your fever doesn’t come down in an hour, I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“After the finale,” he grumbled.

“Ninety minutes.”

“After the finale. Important.”

Xie Lian patted his exposed shoulder, feeling awkward. San Lang huffed and clawed the sheets down irritably, repooling them at his waist. Xie Lian quickly looked at the ceiling, because the planes of San Lang’s abdomen were impossibly nice, and he shouldn’t, and he had such a good waist, and dark areolas, and his shoulders were broad and his skin was smooth.

“Well,” he squeaked. “I should let you sleep, I’ll be over there at the table if you need me!”

He prepared to flee again, until he felt a hand on his forearm.

“Don’t leave me.” His voice was soft.

His heart twisted. “Ah, San Lang, I won’t leave you, I’ll just be right over-”

“Don’t leave me.”

His stomach fluttered, and he stifled a fond laugh. He sat back on the bed, and patted his hand. “Alright, San Lang. I won’t leave you.”

“Want to be with you.”

“You’re with me right now!”

“You’re my hero,” he mumbled.

“Alright,” snorted Xie Lian.

“Closer.”

Xie Lian looked down. “Well, I can’t really get closer without-”

“Closer,” he insisted, lip jutting.

Xie Lian stared at him. “You’re not at all yourself right now, are you?”

“This is the real me,” he chuckled, eyes glassy and vague. “Whiny and needy. Knew you wouldn’t like that.”

Xie Lian sighed, exasperated. He was uncertain- getting on the bed with him might make him too hot. On the other hand, sweating out the fever might be for the best.

But he caught San Lang staring up at him so mournfully. How could he not do what he asked?

He settled on top of the covers, careful not to touch San Lang. “You’re not needy or whiny, San Lang. And it's okay to be both of those things with me, when you want to.”

“You won’t leave me?”

Xie Lian patted his hand again. “I would never, San Lang. You want me to stay, so how could I leave? I’m right here. Why don’t you close your eyes?”

“So hot,” he complained.

“I’ll keep an eye on you,” he vowed.

San Lang obeyed, closing his eyes with his face turned towards his, and Xie Lian studied the shadows on his cheeks from his eyelashes for a while, until he closed his own eyes, just for a moment.

***

“Gege,” came the faraway voice.

Xie Lian felt groggy, but that was San Lang calling him, so he smiled. “Mmm.”

“Gege,” he repeated, shaking him gently.

He opened his eyes, and stifled a yelp.

San Lang was propped up looming over him, and he was definitely naked under the sheets, and why was- oh, the *fever* -

“Ah! San Lang, are you alright?” He frantically checked his watch. 1.55 am.

“I’m so sorry!” His hand shot up to check San Lang’s forehead, but San Lang caught it.

“I’m feeling alright, gege.”

“You are? Are you sure?”

“I felt pretty weird for a few hours there, but I’m fine now.”

San Lang looked alright, it was true. But a little strange. His gaze was dark and intense. Xie Lian breathed and realised his hand was still caught in his. And they were on a bed together. There was a thin rumpled sheet between him and San Lang’s fully naked…everything.

San Lang looked a little shamefaced. “I’m alright, really gege. I’m sorry for…for making you stay."

Xie Lian frowned. “I meant what I said. I wouldn’t ever leave you. You asked me not to.”

San Lang's throat bobbed as he shut his eyes briefly.

"Gege, do you understand that you will be the death of me?"

Xie Lian's frown deepened. "I hope not! Please don't die. I don't want you to leave me either, San Lang."

San Lang opened his eyes again, and looked down at him. Xie Lian was tingly. Tingly all over, with him so close.

San Lang smiled. He still hadn't let go of his hand.

"Gege, you can't look at me like that," he whispered, eyes liquid.

Xie Lian's tongue darted out to moisten his lips. Oh no. What was written on his face?

"Like what?" he said nervously.

San Lang took a shaky breath. "Like you wouldn't mind if I came even closer."

Xie Lian went mute. His vocabulary fled his brain entirely. But…he couldn't look away, or make a joke this time.

He held his gaze, and squeezed his hand. San Lang's eyes widened for a moment, and the wave that had been building for weeks broke.

San Lang surged down. Or perhaps Xie Lian flowed up, it was hard to tell. Their lips met, but so did all of them. San Lang cupped his face and Xie Lian threw his arms around his neck, angling his whole body up into him without a second thought.

San Lang's lips were cool and soft, but his kiss was hard and urgent. Xie Lian gasped into his mouth and San Lang made a noise deep in his throat. "Yes, let me hear you gege," he whispered, lips never leaving his as he spoke.

Xie Lian forgot that he didn't know what to do, forgot that he was nervous, because this was San Lang, and of course they were meant to do this.

San Lang moved to his neck as Xie Lian writhed and arched unconsciously. San Lan growled low in his throat whenever he moved. It was delicious, and he really hadn't known that this was desire, all along, and of course it was, how could it not be with San Lang?

"San Lang," were the only words he remembered. San Lang seemed to like that, moving on top of him to pin Xie Lian down and continue mouthing underneath his ear and round his jawline until Xie Lian was panting. The weight of him was unbearably good, he needed it. Xie Lian's hand ghosted up San Lang's neck to cup his face, and San Lang paused above him. A full body shiver ran through Xie Lian when their eyes met.

Xie Lian still didn't know what to say, except "San Lang."

San Lang closed his eyes, pained, and bent to nip at his ear. "Gege."

Xie Lian had to say something. Anything. With human words. He clutched at San Lang's face, and San Lang stilled, concern flickering across his face.

"Is this…too much, gege?"

Xie Lian shook his head from side to side. "Don't leave me," he managed. San Lang gripped at his waist, hard, and sealed his lips with his own, so there was no space between them. None. Not a millimeter. It didn't matter. San Lang still wasn't close enough. His skin was so smooth. He ran his hands down his back, and pulled at him-

"Xie Lian," came the abrupt voice outside.

Ling Wen's voice.

Xie Lian froze. So did San Lang.

"Xie Lian…your show will be starting in two minutes, if you wish to join us?"

He turned his head. "Um, hi! Be right out!"

He cringed. Why did he say that?

He looked up at San Lang. Who was sprawled on top of him, looking down at him with an expression that made him tremble.

"Oh, hey Ling Wen!" he heard Shi Qingxuan call across the carpark. "Cutting it fine!"

"Traffic," she said curtly.

San Lang exhaled through his nose and closed his eyes. "Premiere time gege."

"Yes!" he said hoarsely.

San Lang eyed him, and raised his body off him, settling back against the bed as Xie Lian blushed and looked at the ceiling.

"Go, gege. It's important you have this moment. I'll follow along in a minute, when I'm dressed. I just have something I need to do, quickly."

"Right!" nodded Xie Lian, rolling away in embarrassment. "Ok! I'll see you there!"

He tripped on the way down the stairs, and didn't remove his hands from his face for a full minute.

***

Xie Lian barely saw the episode.

Because San Lang never turned up.

Shi Qingxuan sat sprawled on the couch in the *Wind Master* bus, asking polite questions about the filming, while Shi Wudu barely disguised his confusion.

“So it’s just…this? Just you, in storage units, doing this? You’re…basically cleaning.”

“Ah, nonsense brother! It’s wholesome. I get it, totally!” said Shi Qingxuan encouragingly. “Oh, Xie Lian, are you cold?”

Xie Lian was trembling. A comedown from adrenaline, perhaps. “I’m fine, haha!” he insisted, avoiding their eyes and pretending he didn’t sound unhinged. “Just nervous for the numbers!"

He didn’t care about the numbers. He watched the door far more than the screen. It remained closed. He was so stupid. Stupid, and San Lang was probably packing his bags right now. They had crossed a line, and it had ruined everything. He couldn’t ask anything more of San Lang than he’d already asked, and now he’d gone and…

San Lang had fifty million fans. An absurd amount of money. And he’d far more than paid his debt to whoever helped him, when he was younger. He would never want to do another season of dust and mould and rodents with him.

Xie Lian was therefore so miserably distractible that he didn’t fully compute what was happening until it was far too late.

As the credits rolled, two people stormed into the bus.

“Mu Qing?! Feng Xin, what are you-”

“Oh hello!” said Shi Qingxuan, unfazed. “Even more studio mates! Do you want drinks?”

“Come with us right now,” ordered Feng Xin, eyes fixed on Xie Lian.

“Eh? Why are you here- you're too late, it just finished-”

“It’s urgent. Now, Xie Lian,” urged Mu Qing.

“I, oh- well, alright, but l- I just need to wait for San Lang-”

“No way. We have to get you away from him.”

“What?” laughed Xie Lian. “You’re acting silly, it’s 3am and you come thundering in here telling me to go with you-”

“He is *crazy*, Xie Lian. We *told* you.”

Ling Wen spoke slowly and suspiciously. “The numbers are being tabulated as we speak. I need to award the trophy. Xie Lian should remain here.”

Xie Lian was still finding this funny, so he rolled his eyes and chuckled. “Let’s talk outside for a minute, you two.”

Shi Qingxuan's jaw was slack as they watched him go. "Xie Lian, is everything alright?"

"I'll be fine. Just give us a minute."

He followed them down the stairs. What he didn't expect is that they didn't talk to him at all.

They just shared a glance, each seized one of his arms, and began dragging him along to their van.

"Wh- HEY, don't- there's no need to do this-"

"You won't listen to us any other way."

"What do you want?! Let's just talk about this!"

"There's something you need to see."

"Don't do this! San Lang, I need to, he might worry-"

"Good," said Feng Xin darkly.

They threw him in the van, and Mu Qing scrambled in after him, pulling the doors shut from the inside. Feng Xin ran around front. The engine was already running.

From the windows, he could see San Lang finally approaching the *Wind Master* bus with his phone in his hand, and a lighter, which was strange because he didn't smoke. Shi Qingxuan was standing outside open mouthed; Ling Wen watched darkly from the window. Gestures and words were exchanged, and San Lang's head whipped around in alarm, but it was too late.

The tires squealed as Feng Xin took off.

"Where are you taking me? Come on, you two, you can't do this-"

"Trust us. It's for your own good."

"Why are you doing this-"

"Xie Lian! Seriously! We are trying to protect you, okay! Hua Cheng has his own storage unit. You need to see what's in it."

***

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter! *cries* the fic will be finished this weekend, so not long to wait from the cliffhanger.

Oh, and if any Ghost Citizens wish to submit your own haiku, feel *very* free

Fic is retweetable here if you fancy doing so!

The Final Numbers

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains canon references to un-aliving. Please take care, and I promise the angst with a happy ending tag is correct.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

***

Xie Lian gave up trying to argue with Mu Qing and Feng Xin. He sat furiously in the van instead, arms around his knees, and refused to look at them. Poor San Lang. This was the last thing he needed after a night when he'd been ill and then they…they'd…

He was kicking himself. Why was he so unable to say what he felt? He could have taken two seconds when Ling Wen was at the door to say something other than "Be right there!"

And he hadn't.

Feng Xin was driving like a bat out of hell, and Xie Lian would know, because he had had many encounters with bats. They drove for only ten minutes, until they roared into the carpark of Hong-Hong Storage, and Xie Lian felt the first whispers of misgiving.

He'd pointed this business out on the map to San Lang when they were approaching the city, and San Lang shifted in his seat, and told him he heard it had closed down. It was why they'd ended up at Mount Tonglu Storage instead. But here it was, clearly fully operational.

"Xie Lian," said Mu Qing heavily, watching him. "I'm sorry, but you have to see it."

"How do you even know about a storage locker belonging to San Lang?"

"I…well, it doesn't…someone gave us a tip-"

"What!? Who?!"

"I..." Mu Qing mouthed.

Xie Lian narrowed his eyes. Mu Qing was always a terrible liar.

"You don't even know, do you? They were anonymous."

"Well...that's not the point-"

"Mu *Qing!"*

“It’s more than that, Xie Lian! I finally remembered him!”

“What? You- you already knew San Lang?”

“So did you, Xie Lian. All of us have met him before. On *Flower Crowned Prince*.”

“There’s no way. We never had minors as guests, he couldn’t have been more than-”

“Fifteen, exactly. And he wasn’t a guest.”

Feng Xin opened the doors, and Mu Qing jumped out.

Xie Lian didn't move a muscle.

“I’m not going to invade San Lang’s privacy. If he wants to keep secrets, he’s allowed to. Shame on you for listening to some anonymous tip that just wants to tear him down.”

Feng Xin writhed in utter frustration. “For once in your life, just let us help you!”

Xie Lian folded his arms petulantly.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin exchanged looks. “Fine. You gave us no choice.”

They each grabbed another arm again.

Xie Lian went limp, just to make it difficult for them. “Oh, *you-”* fumed Feng Xin, puffing as Xie Lian intentionally dragged his legs behind him like he was unconscious.

They reached unit 120. The padlock was already hanging off it.

Feng Xin pulled open the door. Xie Lian blinked as his eyes adjusted, and his mouth fell open.

***

Ten Years Ago

“Xianle, we’ll start in ten.”

“Okay!” he replied. His golden mask was still not sitting right on his face according to his makeup artist, so he let her fuss until she was satisfied.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin hung around in his dressing room, bored and already ready. Jun Wu, then their young and ambitious producer-CEO, sat with them.

“Boss, why do you never give us a heads up on who we’re meeting?” complained Mu Qing.

“Because of this guy,” said Jun Wu, grinning and jerking his head at Xie Lian. “If he finds out the details about who we meet beforehand, the cameras miss his emotion when he hears their stories. They have to capture that TV magic.”

Feng Xin sighed. “Can't you at least give *us* two a hint about the kind of day we're about to have? Remember that pizza restaurant that was going out of business? Covered in sauce. All day.”

Xie Lian adjusted his golden robes. “I liked that episode! It was so rewarding to see everyone enjoying the pizza when we did the relaunch! I heard the business is doing well again, and isn’t that why we do this? To help people?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing exchanged a look. “So freaking earnest, as always,” muttered Mu Qing.

Jun Wu cleared his throat patiently. “Xianle. Helping people is certainly the, uh...'premise' of the show. But this is reality TV, not reality. Our aim is to capture emotional highs and lows, so we can keep our audience interested, and advertisers wanting to pay us. Which means we also have to... *engineer* those highs and lows, right? Script them.”

“I prefer to think that we’re turning lows *into* highs, and that they’re very real. And I don't think we need to manipulate people," said Xie Lian, smoothing his costume.

Jun Wu cocked his head. "Mmm," he said, face unreadable. "Be careful, Xianle. Sometimes TV has to make a big splash to survive, and you'll need to mete out that earnestness a bit more sparingly. Otherwise, it puts you up on a pedestal. I promise you: the audience won't love the prince as much as you think they will, if you fall. You won't survive if you don't play your character."

Xie Lian's hands stilled slightly. He didn't like it when Jun Wu used the word 'character.'

"I can't be on a pedestal if I refuse to get up on one," he laughed in reply. "And I'm not a real prince. I'm just a person."

Feng Xin's jaw tightened in warning. Xie Lian said that line in their last episode. It was very popular with the audience. Xie Lian gave him a quick smile of reassurance. He knew what he was doing. He wasn't misreading the mood of their boss, he was just...not bending to it.

"People cannot be controlled. Characters can, Xianle. Think of it that way."

"Why should I try to control anyone?"

Jun Wu tapped at his temples. "Do you understand why I made you a prince for your character, Xianle?"

Xie Lian knew perfectly well what Jun Wu was referring to.

Jun Wu made strange little comments like this sometimes. He called Xie Lian "Your Highness," a lot, and said he was "banking on Xianle's silver tongue, despite its silver spoon."

Xie Lian had grown up wealthy. Jun Wu hadn't, and had struggled greatly to get Heavenly Capital Studios off the ground until Xie Lian was such a surprise hit. He didn't want to poke at that sore spot too much. Jun Wu worked hard, of course he deserved all of his success.

"I know I've led a very lucky life, Jun Wu. You're right. All the more reason for me to do this kind of work. After all, a prince should serve the people above all else."

Mu Qing and Feng Xin exchanged uncomfortable glances. Feng Xin actually shrunk down in his seat a little.

"About that. The uh...papers have been circulating a story that you've been donating your paychecks to food banks."

"Oh dear!"

"Indeed. It's not a good story, especially when we're still not even turning a profit. I'll tell them it's false."

"Oh, no it's correct... I just donated anonymously! I wish they hadn't spilled the beans."

Jun Wu's mouth tightened, just for a moment. "Xianle. This is a business. We're not saving the common people of the world."

Xie Lian frowned. "Why can't television try to do both? I don't need that money."

Jun Wu sighed, looking at Xie Lian for a long moment. He nodded, as if he'd come to a conclusion.

"...I need to make a call. Five minutes, Xianle. Final guest."

Back when Xie Lian was 'discovered' on Yi Nian bridge, he'd never thought that taking a quick street fashion photo would turn into screen tests for his own show. Jun Wu's smile never quite reached his eyes, but Xie Lian was nonetheless happy to join his company. Especially given he believed in him so much.

"I know you'll be a star, Xianle. I'll make you a household name, trust me."

His parents didn't quite approve. He was their only child, and they expected that he'd go into their family business, Xianle Insurance. But Xie Lian was 19, and Jun Wu was very convincing.

The thing that got his parents on board was Xie Lian asking to bring his best friends on the show too. That way, he wasn't alone in showbusiness, and he'd have two people who his father considered 'more grounded' to help him. Xie Lian had always had his head in the clouds, according to his father.

Jun Wu agreed; Xie Lian casting his friends saved money and allowed for familiar chemistry between the trio without any acting. Neither Mu Qing nor Feng Xin particularly liked the idea, at first. But then their pilot episode was surprisingly picked up after it tested off the charts with audiences, and they decided to give it a try.

It still created a certain awkward dynamic that Xie Lian never learned to navigate; one where Xie Lian was the golden goose and his friends became…well, the kind word would be

deputies. The new inequity of their relationship often made things tense in a manner that Xie Lian only realised in hindsight.

Xie Lian stood, hair, makeup and costume finally just so, and walked out of his trailer. He nearly tripped and fell, because at the very moment he wrenched his door open, a small boy had been raising his fist to knock.

They barrelled into each other, and Xie Lian grabbed the boy just before he fell backward and cracked his head on the ground.

“Ah! Are you alright?!”

The boy looked up at him, mute and shocked.

“I’m very sorry, I’m quite clumsy!” tried Xie Lian again.

The boy blinked at him. Xie Lian noticed he was wearing bandages around one of his eyes. He was actually older than he thought, a teenager perhaps, but he was scrawny and small.

“Oh! Sorry, I should let go of you.”

He tumbled down the final stair and righted them both on the ground. “There you are,” he said awkwardly, patting the boy’s head.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing strolled out of the trailer, eyeing the commotion. “What’s going on here?”

“Oh, just a little clumsiness.”

“Who is this?” said Mu Qing suspiciously.

“I don’t know,” said Xie Lian brightly. “What’s your name! Are you an intern?”

“I- I-”

“He’s not an intern,” said Feng Xin, bristling. “I saw you trying to sneak on set yesterday, you little shit! Xie Lian, he’s a fan, he’s not supposed to be here.”

Xie Lian peered at him, and saw the boy reddening underneath his bandages. For the first time, he also noticed that he was clutching a poster for *Flower Crowned Prince.*

“Oh! I’m very sorry, I don’t have a pen on me!”

Mu Qing’s eyebrows practically disappeared. “Xie Lian, he snuck onto set. I’m calling security.”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. He’s not causing any harm!”

“Dramatic?” he fumed, vein popping.

Xie Lian huffed. He didn't have any merchandise, or anything to give the kid. He looked around the empty lot, and spotted a white flower growing amongst some weeds. "Here," he laughed, picking it. "It's all I've got."

The boy took the flower gingerly. "Thank you," he whispered.

"That's alright. Thank you so much for watching our show! It's lovely that you came to see us."

"Just you," he said suddenly, reddening further.

"Oh! Well then I'm even more honoured."

"Xie Lian! Your guest is waiting!" called the production assistant, sticking her overworked head around the corner.

Xie Lian sighed. "I'm very sorry. I'd love to talk further, but I have to go. We're filming the two-parter final episode today! I hope you'll watch."

"I will. It's why I…" the boy took a breath. "Sometimes, it's…it's hard to keep going, and I- I don't know why I'm still here…but, I like your show…" he trailed off. Xie Lian was alarmed to see his eyes were filled with tears.

Feng Xin frowned deeply. "Um, Xie Lian…"

"Go ahead without me."

Mu Qing shook his head stubbornly. "We're not leaving you alone with a rogue fan-"

"He means me no harm. Go ahead."

They left reluctantly, shooting daggers at the boy.

Xie Lian properly looked him over. His clothes were quite ragged and dirty. Even the bandages didn't look as fresh as they should. He was skinny. His heart broke a little. This kid was far too young to be struggling so much.

He placed a hand on his shoulder. "You don't need to be ashamed. If you're finding things hard, you use whatever you have to, to get through. Even if the thing that makes you feel better doesn't make sense to anyone else. Even if that's me. I don't think that's wrong, or bad. If you need to use me as your reason, use me. I'd be so happy to help you."

The boy wiped his face furiously, as if horribly angry with himself for crying.

Xie Lian looked around. He really should call his producer over, anyone, to make sure this boy got a meal and a ride home, and his details so he could check in on him-

"Thank you," the boy whispered, and fled.

"Wait! I- oh-" muttered Xie Lian. The boy vaulted right over the fence.

“Xie *Lian-”* called the production assistant frantically, rounding the corner looking panicked.

“Yes! Yes I’m coming,” he said vaguely. He shook himself. He needed to focus.

Xie Lian steeled himself to meet his final ‘subject.’ It was important to bond with them, to make sure he could help, to roll up his sleeves and answer whatever prayer they sent his way.

He was unprepared, then, for the chill that went down his spine when he was introduced to Lang Ying.

***

Normally, the ‘prayers’ selected by the casting agent were simple. To find a lost dog. To pass an exam. To save a local community centre.

Things were not so simple with Lang Ying, who had just lost his wife and son.

Xie Lian was shocked. But he sat respectfully with him as Lang Ying took him to their graves. He asked the cameras to be shut off for him to grieve privately. Internally, Xie Lian was panicking. He was not a grief counsellor, a therapist, anything even remotely qualified for this kind of problem.

To his credit, he didn’t react *too* badly when Lang Ying told him what his prayer was.

Revenge.

His son had died on a waitlist for a life saving surgery the insurance company would not cover. His wife had followed along days later, heartbroken.

Lang Ying’s prayer was to take down Xianle Insurance.

Xie Lian could see what the idea behind the episode was. For two people to come to a simple and honest resolution, to hug at the end and let the tears of forgiveness flow.

That was not what happened.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin argued with Jun Wu, behind the scenes. "This is way too much!"

"He lied about his prayer! It's too late to cast anyone else. We'll just have to script this, massage it with editing. It will be fine. Just play your characters, and you'll be fine."

Even the camera operators were starting to panic by the end, trained on Lang Ying pacing menacingly outside Xianle Headquarters, looking as if he wanted to wage war. No matter what approach Xie Lian tried with him, Lang Ying could not be talked down.

And as the first part of the double finale aired, it turned out the public were with Lang Ying.

Xie Lian was confused. Where was the footage of where he’d gone to plead with his parents, the Board of Directors for Xianle Insurance? Only to be told by them and three separate

doctors that there were no pediatric surgeons in the country who could operate on the child's condition with any more than a miniscule chance of survival?

Where were the tears he shed, learning that Lang Ying's son had never really had a chance?

Gone. On the cutting room floor.

It was 2007, and Twitter had just been invented. *Flower Crowned Prince* was one of its first casualties. Looking back, Xie Lian understood totally. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were right. He was too earnest, and in the face of an actual real life tragedy, it came across as naive at best and embarrassingly out of touch at worst.

Ahead of a looming financial crisis, Xianle Insurance, and Xie Lian particularly, became the flashpoint for class fury. And he didn't blame them in the slightest. He had lived a ludicrously sheltered life, and here he was, walking around in golden robes and a golden mask at 19, telling people how to solve their problems.

The hordes descended, and pointed to Xie Lian's privileged upbringing, Xianle Insurance's profits, the exclusions in their policies.

It didn't matter that Xianle had a reputation for the most inclusive healthcare around; that they had a fund dedicated to free care for the homeless. If anything, that made it worse. The most inclusive company still got a *child* killed. They became the poster-company for a broken system.

Mu Qing was the first to break. They put the footage in the final episode.

His mic was on. Cameras caught him talking urgently to Feng Xin in an alcove.

"But…don't you think Lang Ying has a point about this? My mom…(inaudible)"

Feng Xin's back was to the camera. "What are you going to do? Leave? (inaudible) disloyal."

"Disloyal? To who? My own mother?"

By the time the final episode aired, Xie Lian realised what had happened. He was no longer the hero of the narrative. Lang Ying was the champion of the downtrodden. The audience were rabid for it. It was the ultimate bait and switch, to have them cheer for the Prince all season only to reveal that he was the villain all along.

Jun Wu was unfazed. "We'll save you next season, Xianle. We'll ascend you back onto that pedestal, a redemption arc."

That was not what happened. Xie Lian was a person, not a character. The real life consequences were not such a malleable narrative.

Xianle Insurance lost 90% of their customer base. Xie Lian had to go into hiding with his mother and father, who were voted out as the joint CEOs by a unanimous Board. Feng Xin lasted longer than Mu Qing, but once they ran out of enough money to pay the bodyguards, he and Xie Lian were left to be the ones sifting through all the death threats.

“Do you…do you have any money left? Stored away somewhere?” he asked one day.

“No,” said Xie Lian shortly. “Only…the severance money. But...you know.”

Flower Crowned Prince was now cancelled, due to ongoing public fury. There would be no second season. Jun Wu had looked wretched when he told him, but Xie Lian patted him on the shoulder and told him it was alright. It was for the best to cut him loose. He didn't want to bring the whole studio down with him.

Feng Xin nodded. His eyes were hollow, and he wasn’t sleeping.

“I think you should take it.”

Xie Lian shook his head stubbornly. He and his parents were united on that, at least. They still had their pride, and the Studio didn't have the money for the payout. They'd go bankrupt, if he made them pay it, and everyone who'd worked with him would lose their jobs.

Sometimes, reading through all the threats- online and in letters- Xie Lian recognised the look on Feng Xin’s face. It was the same one he’d had, standing opposite Lang Ying. It was the: ‘I’m 19, and I’m not qualified for this’ look.

In the end, his parents were the ones he should have worried about. Their pride mattered *too* much. They were twelve dollars away from homelessness, when it happened.

It was just days after Feng Xin decided to take the same production job Mu Qing took, on the condition of no contact with Xie Lian for the remainder of his contract.

Xie Lian found his parents’ bodies in a roadside motel.

In an act of small mercy, his brain blanked out the memory entirely. He had not a single recollection of finding them, or the days after, the coroner or the police or the news cameras. Not that he tried very hard to recall it all. He remembered the feeling, and that was more than enough. Even seeing roadside motels was enough to make his breath come short and bile rise in his throat.

His next clear memory was days later, clearing out their room alone, when he found a key he didn’t recognise. It had a keyring on it, labelled ‘Xianle Storage.’ They were nowhere near Xianle by then, but he made up his mind.

He walked all the way there, 48 miles, with the last of his possessions stuffed in a backpack. He wondered if the unit would be his salvation. Maybe it had things of value that he could sell off, to at least afford a place to stay and some meals.

Xie Lian opened the unit, and fell to his knees. He laughed hysterically for a long time.

It was stuffed to the brim with merchandise for *Flower Crowned Prince.* There were even cardboard cutouts of himself, gesturing magnanimously as if granting a prayer. Xie Lian laughed himself into the foetal position, because he had nowhere else in the world to go but here.

He considered revenge, for a little while. On Lang Ying, who had never backed down in interview after interview, no matter how dire the situation got for him or his parents, no matter how vicious the harassment. But he couldn't. Revenge just wasn't who he was.

After weeks of sleeping in that unit, becoming increasingly isolated and numb, he walked out to scrounge some food one day. He tried to slip out the back gate, but the owner spotted him.

He had already decided that he wouldn't be living for one more day. This would be his last meal.

He attempted to avoid eye contact as she hurried out of the office after him, but she stopped him. "I know you've been sleeping in that unit. It's overdue for payment anyway, and you're not allowed to do that."

Xie Lian laughed bitterly. "Fine." What was one last thing to lose? It didn't matter.

She eyed him for a long moment, and sighed slowly.

"Ah, sweetheart. Take as long as you need."

His eyes raised to hers in shock.

"What?"

She shook her head pityingly. "I saw the show, you know. I recognise you, mask or no mask. You got quite cursed there, didn't you?"

Xie Lian said nothing. It had been a long time since he'd spoken to anyone, or rather, since anyone had spoken to him.

She walked back into the office, and reached over the counter.

She came back out with something in her hands. "Here. It's a little hot out."

Xie Lian looked down at what she'd pressed into his hands. It was a white cap, with the Xianle storage logo on it.

He couldn't say anything. She seemed to know that, and left him alone.

He ambled along the road for a while, until he decided that it wouldn't be a very good idea to die after all.

That afternoon, he walked back into the Xianle Storage office, and asked if there were any units he could clear out in exchange for some food. She accepted, and he never viewed storage units as his rock bottom ever again. They were his sanctuary. The thing that made him feel better, even if it didn't make sense to anyone else.

Six months later, he called Ling Wen, and asked to see his contract.

If a woman with a hat could save his life just by giving him a slightly nicer day, he owed it to the world to try to do the same for whoever might be watching him.

***

Whatever Mu Qing and Feng Xin expected upon opening the unit, it wasn't that Xie Lian would laugh.

Which he did.

Heartily. Even fondly.

"Is he in shock?" whispered Mu Qing.

"I think he's having a mental break," muttered Feng Xin.

"Um…Xie Lian…are you alrigh-"

Xie Lian ignored him, and walked inside. It was difficult to do so, since the unit was so crammed.

At first, he'd wondered if San Lang had just found his old Xianle storage unit, and taken it all. But this unit had even more stuff in it than his old one had. More figurines, more cardboard cutouts, more posters and t-shirts and memorabilia he'd not even known was still in existence outside of a dump somewhere. There were even what looked like hand sculpted figurines and statues, though they must have been San Lang's early work, because they weren't very good.

"Wow," he managed.

"Yeah," said Feng Xin heavily. "I'm sorry, Xie Lian. We really didn't know how else to tell you, except for you to see this for yourself."

Xie Lian frowned, and turned. "Tell me what?"

A loaded moment passed, as Mu Qing and Feng Xin stared at him in disbelief.

"That Hua Cheng is *crazy,"* said Mu Qing slowly.

Xie Lian cocked his head. "Who are you to think you can call him that? That's not a kind word."

Mu Qing's mouth fell open. "You're…you're joking me, right? You're standing in a whole unit full of proof that he is your *stalker.* He- he was that boy! That boy you met, right before Lang Ying, who snuck on set? I knew I recognised him."

Waves of shock coursed over Xie Lian, and settled into something warmer and golden in his chest.

"Oh. That was him," he whispered. Unbidden, he began to smile. "He's still alive."

Feng Xin was starting to look panicked at his reaction.

“You- Xie Lian, *look at this!* Just for once, use the evidence of your own eyes, not what he’s told you, not what he’s done to *manipulate you!”*

“That’s strange. You always told me I was so pigheaded. How could anyone manipulate someone as pigheaded as me?”

“You seriously think *this-”* jabbed Mu Qing, “is no big deal?”

“I think if it made sense to San Lang, and it helped him, then I am in no position to judge whatsoever. Trust me, you have no idea just how little I can judge him.”

“You can’t-”

A clatter sounded. Running feet. San Lang tore into his line of sight, panting and crazed.

“San Lang!” called Xie Lian, frantic, but Mu Qing and Feng Xin formed a wall in front of him, outstretching their arms protectively.

“No way, you *lunatic*, don’t come one inch closer,” growled Feng Xin.

“Too late anyway, he’s seen it all now. He knows what kind of person you are,” spat Mu Qing.

San Lang’s eyes were wide. He looked around the unit, and bowed his head. He looked utterly defeated.

Xie Lian’s thoughts were wild as he tried unsuccessfully to scrabble and scramble past his bodyguards. Mu Qing and Feng Xin wouldn't budge. Then he heard the words that broke his heart.

“I suppose you won’t ever want to see me again after this, gege,” said San Lang softly.

Xie Lian closed his eyes painfully. He couldn’t get past them; he wasn't big or strong enough. He prepared himself to say what he had to say in the moment.

“Yes, San Lang. I think that’s for the best.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin’s arms relaxed, just slightly.

San Lang nodded bleakly, eyes on the ground.

“I understand. I- I won’t bother you again, ge- Xie Lian. I’m sorry.”

He turned, and walked away.

Xie Lian hid his shaking fists inside his sleeves.

Mu Qing and Feng Xin watched him go, still wary and on guard. After they heard his engine start and pull away, they dropped their arms entirely.

“Phew. That was close, Xie Lian, I thought he might do something way worse- wait, HEY! WHERE ARE YOU GOING?”

“DON’T FOLLOW ME!” called Xie Lian, finally free and sprinting for his life. He ripped into the carpark, and started the van with the stolen keys from Feng Xin’s jacket pocket.

“XIE LIAN- COME BACK-” roared Mu Qing, running after the van as Xie Lian left them both in the dust.

He weaved wildly, hoping against hope that he’d picked the right direction. After a few minutes, he nearly crashed into San Lang’s truck where he’d parked it by the side of the road. San Lang was outside, doubled over under a quiet streetlight.

Xie Lian didn’t care about parking. He left the van running in the middle of the road, and leapt out.

“San Lang! Wait!” he said, breathless.

San Lang didn’t turn around, but he did straighten up.

“Ah. Do you want to know the final numbers?” he asked.

Xie Lian’s fingers twitched. He wished he could see his face, but San Lang didn’t want to show it.

He’d have to show him some other way, then.

He ran forward and threw his arms around his middle. San Lang looked down in wonder at the hands clasped around him.

Xie Lian let out a shaky breath. “I’m so glad you made it, San Lang.”

San Lang was frozen. “That I…I what?”

“I remember you,” he murmured, smiling into his t-shirt with his eyes scrunched shut. “You came on set to see me. And when everything went wrong with the show, I worried about you. I always wondered if I’d let you down. If it was the only thing keeping you going, and everything happened the way it did… then I wondered if you….you decided it was all too much, like I nearly did.”

San Lang was utterly still. “You- you nearly-” he whispered.

“I’m so glad you made it,” sniffed Xie Lian.

San Lang turned to face him, face stricken. “I never knew you- you too-"

Xie Lian kept his arms around his waist, tight, and buried his face in his chest. "Yeah. I suppose I should say I'm so glad *we* made it. But it's alright now, San Lang. We're both alright."

San Lang's arms came around him hesitantly.

Xie Lian peeked up at him. “San Lang, I’m so sorry for what I said back there. If I told you I didn’t care at all about that stuff, Mu Qing and Feng Xin wouldn’t have let me go or…ah, let me steal their van. They think I’ve gone mad. Both of us.”

San Lang stared down at him, lips parted. He was pale and drawn. His skin felt cold. Xie Lian rubbed at his back to warm him up, fretting. San Lang had been through so much.

“…You…you really don’t mind? About what was in there? I…I just didn’t like to see people throwing it all away, or selling it just so people could deface it…so I bought everything I could. And when I started sculpting...I couldn’t find you for so long, it was…the only piece of you I could get…”

Xie Lian shook his head firmly. “I don’t mind at all, San Lang. And…I kind of knew.”

San Lang’s brows knit. “You did?”

Xie Lian nodded slyly. “Would you like to tell me who the ‘silent investor’ is, San Lang?”

San Lang swallowed audibly. “Uh…yeah. It’s me.”

“I know,” chuckled Xie Lian.

San Lang shook his head in wonder. “How?”

“I saw that video on the Youtubes, about you ‘raining blood’ down on the Green Ghost. And you like white flowers. Crimson Rain Sought Flower Investments? Subtlety is not your strength, San Lang.”

San Lang’s eyes moved rapidly, lost in memory. He cleared his throat. “Wait… didn’t you watch those videos on my first day?”

“Mhmm! And also, I never did tell anyone where I was filming that morning. How many businesses did you drive to before you found me, San Lang?”

San Lang grimaced. “Three.”

“And someone tipped you off that I was back at the Capital?”

“Mmm. He Xuan.”

“Eh? The IT Guy *again?!”*

“I know him as Black Water. But yes. He has his own issues with your Studio- more specifically, Shi Wudu.”

“He’s Black Water?!” Xie Lian gaped.

San Lang shrugged.

“Well. That sounds like a real web of intrigue, San Lang.”

San Lang blinked, breathing slowly. “So…you’ve known from my *first day* that there is no silent investor…that I just engineered a way to produce your show myself, so I could be near you?”

Xie Lian shrugged. “I had no reason to worry about that.”

San Lang’s chest heaved, but he didn’t seem ready to let himself laugh, even though Xie Lian was already past that goalpost.

“I…and now? Do you see any reason to worry now?”

Xie Lian shook his head fondly, and cupped his face to look at him very seriously. “I already know the answer to this, but …did you track me down so you could seduce me? Lie to me, manipulate me?”

“No,” he breathed, face crumpling. *“Never.* I didn’t mean for- I just wanted to...to pay you back for what you did for me, for saving me, to finally give you what you deserved-”

Xie Lian raised on his tiptoes, and kissed him.

San Lang held him as if he was impossibly fragile. He was soft and slow and awed with his kiss. Xie Lian was surprised to feel that he too was shaking.

Xie Lian pulled back. “Are you alright, San Lang?”

San Lang shook his head a little. “I’m just a little…overwhelmed, gege.”

Xie Lian beamed. “Oh good. You called me gege again.”

San Lang mouthed. “I didn’t realise I’d stopped.”

“Mmm. You’ve been far too formal with me the last two minutes, San Lang.”

“You…don’t want to ask me anything else? Interrogate me? I’ve…lied to you.” He hung his head.

“I understand why. And we have plenty of time for all the questions and answers.”

San Lang drew himself up, gaze suddenly sharp. “Gege…the show, your numbers…”

“I don’t care, San Lang.”

Xie Lian buried his head in San Lang’s chest, and nuzzled. San Lang finally let out a breath, and tightened his arms around him. Xie Lian made contented noises against his chest. He felt completely calm, finally.

“Gege,” came the rumble. “You’re sure you don't want to know?”

“I couldn’t care less.”

“Oh.”

“Why?” Xie Lian raised his head in suspicion. San Lang’s voice almost sounded…guilty.

“Well…I kind of did something…”

Xie Lian raised an eyebrow.

“San Lang?”

“I’m sorry I took so long, gege, but...I wanted to light one lantern for every hundred thousand viewers,” he said, eyes above his head. “You deserve more than one silly trophy.”

Xie Lian raised his head, and his jaw dropped. There were *thousands.* Thousands of sky lanterns rising into the night, bathing the entire city in light. He felt a smile tugging at his lips, and he let himself beam like a fool. They stood in the golden haze, faces upturned.

“You did all this by yourself, San Lang?”

San Lang looked a little sheepish. “I wanted to surprise you.”

Xie Lian’s heart twisted. San Lang had been lighting all these lanterns while Xie Lian was going mad inside the bus. And then Xie Lian drove away, leaving him there.

“San Lang. The reason I don’t care about the numbers is because nothing could make me happier than I am right now.”

San Lang gave a small, mischievous smile, and stroked his waist. “Are you sure about that?”

***

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

After an exhaustive 6 week investigation, Ghost Citizens are proud to release this statement after the record breaking finale of Scrap Collector. In sum: in 2007, Xie Lian was set up by his own CEO Jun Wu, resulting in the loss of his show, horrific harassment, and worse.

3:30 AM · Jul 20, 2016

53.2K Retweets **3.2K** Quote Tweets **497.7K** Likes

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

Many of you remember the cancellation of Flower Crowned Prince, and the furore after guest Lang Ying vowed revenge on Xianle Insurance (owned by Xie Lian's parents) after a supposedly delayed claim resulted in the death of his child, and wife shortly after.

3:30 AM · Jul 20, 2016

6.8K Retweets **19.5K** Likes

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

We are confident that Lang Ying's wife and child never existed.

There are no marriage, birth, or death records. The headstones shown in the show no longer exist. The claim in question was partially delayed due to improper information submitted, because the child was not real.

3:30 AM · Jul 20, 2016

5.5K Retweets **1.4K** Quote Tweets **57.5K** Likes

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

Yong'an Health, a rival insurance company, made a sizeable investment in Heavenly Capital Studios shortly after the final episode of Flower Crowned Prince.

3:30 AM · Jul 20, 2016

17.2K Retweets **1.1K** Quote Tweets **79.5K** Likes

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

Lang Ying was a working actor/model. Here he is in a 2006 print ad for Yong'an Health. An eagle eyed citizen found this in an old newspaper in a storage unit. After Flower Crowned Prince, his IMDB page was deleted, but not the cache 😏. He lives in a $4.5 million penthouse.

3:31 AM · Jul 20, 2016

40.3K Retweets **11.3K** Quote Tweets **196.9K** Likes

Banyue
@SavagePreceptor

Jun Wu remained on as CEO for Heavenly Capital Studios, and used the funding from Yong'an Health to expand his business to a roster of over a dozen shows bringing in hundreds of millions in advertising.

3:31 AM · Jul 20, 2016

53.4K Retweets **22.2K** Quote Tweets **110.7K** Likes

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Two months later

Xie Lian and San Lang were having their favourite argument again.

"San Lang! Honestly, you can't just *tell* me. I don't want to know the final numbers! And stop using it to- to- you know," he blushed.

"I really don't know, gege. Please enlighten me."

Xie Lian huffed, and resolved to not turn pink every single time he acknowledged that they were two adults who were absolutely obsessed with each other.

"I mean, stop using it as leverage in…in the bedroom."

"I'm just afraid that one of these days I'll let it slip," he said innocently. "It's important you distract me whenever I *almost* say it, so that doesn't happen."

“I’ve told you one thousand times. I don’t care. I don’t work for them anymore, and my show isn’t theirs. My talents belong exclusively to Lord Chengzhu’s Youtube empire.”

San Lang huffed. “Those lanterns took about eight hundred years to light. Don’t you want to know *exactly* how *many* I had to light? I think I deserve an equal number of kisses to make up for it.”

“I’ve definitely given you that many anyway.”

San Lang looked at him, amused. “Hmm. Still not enough, I feel.”

Xie Lian shook his head, and looked out the window with a grin, smelling the ocean air. They were travelling up the coast this month. It was warm, and they didn’t have to worry about where to sleep, because they drove their house around with them.

Xie Lian loved it, because it meant he was always home. Even if they got lost sometimes. It really wasn’t his fault that Googles For Maps was so confusing.

San Lang spared no expense on their RV. It was a little over the top with its couch, flatscreen TV, card table, full kitchen, spa bath and unnecessarily large bed. It also had secret cubbyholes everywhere to store their things, and a huge spice rack for his cooking. It could get cramped, but San Lang didn’t mind brushing past him.

Xie Lian adored it. He was quite fond of small spaces, and San Lang lived in it with him, so it was the best one he’d ever had.

San Lang wouldn’t tell him how much it cost. He simply said: “Every dollar I’ve ever made is because of you, gege. Let me spoil you.”

Xie Lian blushed at the memory. San Lang said the words “let me spoil you” a lot these days, particularly in bed.

For now, he got to wake up every day with brand new scenery, except for one wonderful constant: his lanky, naked husband next to him, eyeing him sleepily and pulling him back down after his morning stretch for further morning activities.

Xie Lian shivered, remembering that morning specifically.

It had been a quick and simple wedding. Xie Lian ignored everyone’s calls for weeks after the finale, while he and San Lang disappeared off the face of the earth. Though they did briefly surface to film one ‘Dice Cup Technique’ episode of *Gambler’s Den*, as promised. It was his channel’s most popular video ever.

They then agreed it was imperative to get married as soon as possible. They quickly decided on a desert wedding, and surprisingly, Banyue was ordained. Xie Lian had no idea what she was talking about when she said her previous experience was usually as a 'High Priestess for Satanic Polyamorous BDSM weddings,' but he didn't wish to pry.

Yet, they needed two witnesses. So Xie Lian decided to kill two birds with one stone, and called Mu Qing and Feng Xin. At least this way he could get the inevitable tirade out of the

way, for not taking over the Capital with them.

“It’s really not my thing, you know,” he said, waiting in the carpark of Banyue Storage on a clear, bright morning.

“Fine, but…your show could be even bigger, if you keep making it.”

“Mmm…Seems Ling Wen baked into my contract that the intellectual property rights for *Scrap Collector* belonged to the CEO, only as long as he was still CEO. Not at all standard, but no one cared about my show, so they didn’t notice. I can make it without the Capital.”

“Uh huh. She also seemed to add a clause into your *boyfriend’s* investment contract that it was only valid as long as Jun Wu was CEO, and Shi Wudu was CFO.”

“Oh yes, San Lang knew that. Honestly, I’d watch out for her. I mean, San Lang had an inside man all along, but I don’t think she was ever really working in Jun Wu’s best interests either.”

“Eh?! What inside man?!”

“Oh, I won’t tell you who he is, but I will say he is incredible at eating. Likes seafood the most.”

“...”

“And thanks for the offer, you two, but it was never about the show. I think that stage of my life is over. I’m happy to leave Scrap Collector at nine wonderful seasons. I have other ideas for shows now!”

Feng Xin raised an eyebrow. “Like what, a cooking show?” he joked.

Xie Lian opened his mouth, and closed it again, slightly crestfallen that his announcement was spoiled.

Mu Qing’s mouth fell open. “Wait a minute, you weren’t seriously thinking of a *cooking show-”*

“I’m enthusiastic! People like that!”

Feng Xin slapped his hand on his face. “Help me,” he moaned.

Xie Lian watched San Lang walk out of their van towards him in his slim dark suit and open red shirt. He looked very, very good. His mouth was dry.

“Actually, about why I asked you to come here- I wondered if you could just quickly help me- um, well, *us*- for a second?”

“Eh? With what? Are you filming?” called Feng Xin, distractedly looking at his phone. He didn’t notice San Lang approaching and peering at it over his shoulder, or his eyes turning positively gleeful.

San Lang cleared his throat loudly. “Isn’t that-”

Feng Xin jumped out of his skin. “What! No!” he said, panicked and hiding his phone. “I mean…stop sending us these!”

“The fanfics? If you hate them so much then why are you on chapter 45, Feng Xin-”

“Chapter 45 is when it gets really good,” said Mu Qing vaguely, eyes far away.

“SHUT UP!” yelled Feng Xin to San Lang, before doing a double take and staring at Mu Qing. “Wait, what?”

Mu Qing’s eyes were wide, but he said nothing, for once. He just looked squarely at Feng Xin with a strange look on his face. Xie Lian shifted uncomfortably. The moment felt a little...heated, but he had other things to do today.

“Um...can you two just come with us to the unit, quietly for one minute? We just need one of your signatures after we say a few things. Oh and…by the way, our priestess is a fan so just…be aware of that.”

Feng Xin swallowed, and broke Mu Qing’s gaze distractedly. “Priestess? What could you need our signatures for? And why are we even back here, and wearing suits for god’s sake-”

They followed begrudgingly along behind them regardless.

Xie Lian turned to San Lang in the archway formed by the open metal doors, and took his hands.

“Wait a minute, why are there flowers all around the doors-” said Mu Qing slowly.

Banyue- clothed in a black tulle gown and positioned ready to perform the wedding march- nearly dropped her bass at the sight of Mu Qing and Feng Xin.

“Um- Xie Lian I know I said I’d be cool but I just want to say *I love you guys so much*.”

They shared an uneasy glance. “Hi,” mumbled Mu Qing. Feng Xin's ears were pink.

Xie Lian smiled serenely. "Shall we start?"

"Uh huh, uh huh," she nodded, breathing quickly and looking like she was going to burst. "But...just quickly- I wrote fanfiction about you! 238 chapters, one million words! It’s called “Hate-Crowned Love!”

Feng Xin's mouth fell open. “Wait...*You’re* FiftyShadesofFengQing?!”

“What happens in the end? I’m up to the dungeon part,” hissed Mu Qing urgently.

Xie Lian barely heard them. He had eyes only for San Lang. Neither of them particularly cared about vows, but he supposed he should say something. They were both very impatient to be married, so he just said what he felt, and started without them.

“San Lang, I love you, and I will love you forever. You’re my whole heart.”

San Lang bowed his head reverently. “Gege. I am forever your most devoted believer.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin’s jaws practically dislocated as Banyue scrambled for her notes.

“I…uh- shit, we didn’t practice- I uh, now pronounce you married?”

“Good,” breathed Xie Lian, eyes shining.

“Oh! Wait! No, we forgot…do you take each other?” panicked Banyue.

“Mmm. Gege, will you marry me?”

“Yup. Will you marry me?”

“I think I just did.”

“Excellent,” he said, beaming.

He pulled the documents out of his suit jacket and handed them over as best he could without taking his eyes off his husband. “And yes, if one of you could just sign on page two under ‘witness’-”

“DID YOU JUST- WAS THAT JUST- DID YOU JUST- HEY! STOP *KISSING-”*

***

Xie Lian and San Lang settled for the night by a desolate, windy beach. It was their one month wedding anniversary. Xie Lian looked forward to waking up to the sound of waves.

“Shall I give you a driving lesson, gege? This is a good spot.”

“Only if I can give you a handwriting lesson.”

“Done.”

Xie Lian had insisted on learning to drive. San Lang was teaching him, though his methods of showing him how to drive stick were very distracting. Xie Lian argued that it was only fair that he share the driving.

Xie Lian didn’t let on the other reason. San Lang was legally blind in one eye. Though under the free healthcare provided by Xie Lian’s parents, he’d been able to keep the eye. Xie Lian had always wondered why it was so easy to sneak up on him on his right side.

Either way, he shouldn’t have to do all the driving by himself. Even though San Lang pouted that his favourite thing in the world was to look over at him as he drove, and seeing him smiling at the landscape or napping peacefully.

San Lang hugged him from behind as they listened to the birds caw and the waves rush in.

“San Lang?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you want to stay in one place, eventually?”

“Only if gege does.”

“Maybe. Maybe somewhere in the mountains, just a little cottage. But with a studio next to it, for us to make our shows.”

“Mmm. I can teach you to sculpt. I’ll make a kiln. And a garden. We can grow some vegetables to put in your cooking.”

“I’d like that. And you can fix things when they break. And take the photos. And lift the heavy things. And tune the van. And build new doors and windows. And take care of the animals, and help me with the dishes. Those are all things a producer does, right?”

“Actually, the job description for ‘husband’ is even more broad, and I signed that contract a month ago today. There are really no limits to what I’d do for you. How about I just build you a whole big house, gege? As a start.”

“Mmm. That’s good, my heart. And a small house will do just fine.”

San Lang breathed a laugh by his ear, and kissed his windchilled cheek. “You know, it’s pretty nice here. Maybe we could do a couple days, this time.”

“A break from driving?”

“Yes. Bed rest.”

“Mmm. That sounds lovely.”

Xie Lian still wasn’t quite used to it all.

He hoped he never would be. He liked waking up with a smile, every day before he even opened his eyes. How could he not be happy? He was never cold, or in pain from sleeping on hard surfaces, or hurried along by angry business owners with shovels or shotguns. He slept in, and burrowed further under the blankets, and luxuriated in his husband every day.

Xie Lian was really the last person to need help taking care of himself. He’d had no choice for so long but to do so. He didn’t *need* it. But he wanted it. Letting San Lang fret over him was wonderful.

Whenever he was hungry, San Lang stopped right then and there to buy him snacks. If they were on the open road, he’d just pull over and make him something in the kitchen. Xie Lian would make him dinner each night, and they’d watch the sunset.

If it was a nice night, San Lang would hang up their huge hammock and they’d snuggle together as the stars came out. San Lang insisted they weren’t really stars, they were the

lanterns still floating around from the finale. He'd start counting them until Xie Lian dissolved into laughter and kissed him to make him stop.

The wind was too strong that night, so they hid in bed instead. Xie Lian traced circles on San Lang's chest as the wind whistled outside.

"Reminds me of the sandstorm, San Lang."

"Mmm. A good night, gege. The first night we slept together."

"Not that kind of sleeping together!"

"Indeed. Far too many clothes."

"Funny what a storm can force. I have a feeling that's when Mu Qing and Feng Xin started sorting things out, trapped in a van together. Mu Qing texted this morning to ask if Banyue is still available to be a celebrant for their wedding. And something about a dungeon theme?"

"I definitely have an important appointment on that day, gege."

"...They haven't even set a date."

"Still."

"Nonsense. You'll go, because I want you to. I can't dance to death metal alone."

San Lang stroked his hair for a while, grumbling, and finally asked the question that had clearly been on his mind.

"You're sure about your show, gege? I assure you. Another season wouldn't be an interruption for me, it would be paradise."

Xie Lian nuzzled his neck for a few moments. "It's hard to explain."

"Well…I'm here, whenever you'd like to."

Xie Lian breathed out slowly. San Lang's skin was always cooler than his, like the cold side of a pillow. So perfect.

"It feels…important that I let it go now, San Lang."

San Lang's fingers were rhythmic and comforting, but he stayed quiet.

Xie Lian chewed at his lip. "I think I...did what I set out to do with it. For the audience, and for myself. *Scrap Collector* was my shelter. But I don't need one anymore. It's like…even if it rains, I have an umbrella now. I'd like to get to know the world again."

San Lang said nothing; he only kissed his hair and held him tight.

Xie Lian meant every word. The world felt so wide and new, now. He hadn't known, hiding inside storage units all these years. Now, there was so much more to see in the world, and

they'd only just started.

It was on his mind sometimes that he and San Lang had very nearly not made it here. It had been hard for both of them. Now…there were moments where Xie Lian still worried that things felt too easy. But whenever San Lang saw that look on his face, he would just kiss him, and look at him very seriously, and say:

"Gege. What did you want, all those years?"

And Xie Lian would smile shyly, and reply: "To make the world a little easier for someone."

To which San Lang would nod, and say: "You did, my love. Now it's your turn."

THE END

Chapter End Notes

I think you can all guess what the numbers were. But Xie Lian likes a little mystery.

This version of Xie Lian and Hua Cheng has been a blast to write and your comments have given me so many WhO GoT YOu SmILiNg LiKE tHAt moments.

Further works: If you're interested, my next Hualian is a fairytale/shapeshifter fic (ferret Xie Lian/fox Hua Cheng). I'll begin publishing after my next Wangxian!

Fic is retweetable here if you fancy doing so! Kudos are always appreciated, they make it more likely that readers will give this weird little concept a shot! I hope this fic made your day a little nicer. That's all I wanted :)

HEART EYES TO YOU ALL

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!